

# Class Participation of International Students in the U.S.A.

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Received: June 6, 2017

Accepted: July 22, 2017

Online Published: July 25, 2017

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v6n4p94

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n4p94>

## Abstract

Following a qualitative research design, this study aims to explore the differences between international and American graduate students in terms of their class participation. The data for the study were collected from a graduate-level class at a university in upstate New York. There were seven participants in the study, three of the participants were American students, and the other four participants were international students, two from China, one from Iran, and one from Sudan. Main source of data was classroom observations. Three classroom sessions were observed and field notes were taken during observations. There were two phases of the data analysis process. During the first phase, field notes were reviewed after observations and five general categories of classroom participation were identified. During the second phase, the data were further analyzed in order to see the differences between American and international students in terms of their class participation according to these five categories. Results of data analysis revealed three main differences between American and international students' class participation in the observed graduate classroom setting. The first main difference involved the short answer/example and explanation categories, the second main difference involved the questions to the instructor/classmates for clarification/repetition and the questions to raise discussion categories, and the last main difference involved the answer/explanation assigned by the instructor category.

**Keywords:** International students, Class participation, Classroom observation

## 1. Introduction

Universities in the U.S.A. welcome international students because educators generally believe that the presence of these students enrich the teaching and learning environment in universities (Kaikai, 1989). Cross-cultural interaction is considered to be very important in today's multicultural world (de Wit, 2008; Knight, 2006). Therefore, American universities aim to provide their students and professors with a cross-cultural environment by admitting international students into their programs, and administrators of American universities generally try to increase the number of international students in their universities. However, cross-cultural communication requires effective interaction between people from different cultures (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). That is, international students should effectively interact with American students and professors if a healthy cross-cultural interaction environment is desired to occur (Yildirim, 2014). Class discussions are important opportunities for maintaining interaction between students and professors. Kao and Gansneder (1995) state that "one way to enhance cross-culture understanding and enrich learning environments for American students may be to increase international students' participation in class discussions" (p. 132). On the other hand, some studies conducted with international students reveal that, due to several reasons, these students' participation to class discussions does not reach to desired amounts; that is, some international students do not participate in class discussions as much as their professors expect them to do (Xu, 1991; Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Jones, 1999).

Following a qualitative research design, this study aims to explore the differences between international and American graduate students in terms of their class participation. This study differs from previous studies for two perspectives: first, most of the previous studies that were conducted on international students' class participation focused on undergraduate students (Maza Duerto, 2004; Barrat & Huba, 1994), but this study focuses on graduate international students' class participation. Investigating graduate international students' class participation is important because most of the class time in graduate courses is devoted to discussions, and each student's contribution to discussions is of vital importance as the number of students in these classes generally is not more than fifteen; secondly, most of the previous research was based on quantitative source of data (Yildirim, 2014), but this study follows a qualitative study design by using field notes and interviews as sources of data. Thus, this study aimed

at investigating whether there are any differences between American and international graduate students in terms of their participation in class discussions.

## 2. Review of Literature

Xu (1991) states that international students face many difficulties during their studies in the United States. They are facing personal problems such as finances, housing, and food; they are facing academic problems such as low English proficiency, hard academic tasks, and adjusting to American academic norms and expectations; and they are having social problems such as making new friends and being accepted by social groups.

Focusing on the language related problems of international students, several research studies revealed that some international students do not participate in class discussions as much as their American classmates (Yildirim, 2014). Gay et al. (1993) state that “working with international students, especially those who have English as a second language, is a challenge and little information is available to help faculty in facilitating these students’ learning” (p. 104). Zhao (1993) states that “poor language proficiency impedes social interactions of foreign students with host students, professors, and other members of the academic community as well as the society at large, which may then lead to possible social and psychological problems and negatively contribute to academic achievement” (p. 11).

While studying in the U.S.A. many international students encounter difficulties that are not experienced by American students. Some examples of these unique challenges are: needing extra time for required readings, having difficulties in understanding class discussions and lectures, and facing problems in communicating concerns and viewpoints. In addition, building interpersonal relationships with American students can be difficult for international students because of the language barrier (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007). In other words, for international students, having better English skills may mean better interpersonal relationships with their American peers; and therefore, it can be suggested that the more English proficiency international students have, the more self-esteem they will have (Barratt & Huba, 1994). Sawir (2005, p. 569) suggests that “of all the social and academic issues and problems facing international students that are cited in recent studies – differences in learning style, culture shock, homesickness, social difficulties – the problem they themselves most often refer to is difficulties with English”.

The difficulties experienced by international students because of their limited language proficiency may be understood better by focusing on specific language skills. Yeh and Inose (2003) focused on the speaking skills of international students and they reported in their study that if international students are not fluent enough at spoken English, the level of acculturative difficulties they encounter becomes significantly higher as compared to international students whose spoken English is more proficient.

Constantinides (1992) conducted a study to investigate the role of listening in international students’ adjustment to academic environments and the study revealed that if an international student encounters an unknown key word or phrase during a lecture, s/he may stop following the lecture and focus on the meaning of the missed word or phrase, which causes the student to miss other important parts of the ongoing lecture. Dolan’s (1997) study focused on the relationship between international students’ English language proficiency and their lack of participation in discussions. The results of the study revealed that limited listening skills may be blocking international students’ understanding of the classroom discussions, and their limited speaking abilities may be hindering their participation in these discussions.

Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) focused on the writing-skills-related challenges experienced by international students by examining their academic writing difficulties in a case study. The results revealed that international students sometimes bring different writing styles from their home countries, and they generally need some assistance while adjusting to the writing requirements and culture of the new academic environment they enter. Therefore, instructors of international students should be willing to offer more help during these students’ adjustment to the requirements of written language of the new academic culture they enter. Serverino’s (2004) study with international students who take ESL writing courses at an American university indicated that they generally need help with rhetoric related aspects of language such as thesis, support, audience and purpose; even if they have good knowledge of grammar and sentence structure of English because of the emphasis on these aspects in their home countries. Spack (1997) and Prior (1995) also focused on writings of international students from different levels and their studies revealed that writing may remain problematic even for the international students who are considered successful. Casanave (1995) conducted a study in order to better understand the writing experiences of twelve international students and the results indicated that the fundamental problem is not that international students cannot write but rather in their writings they think and organize their written works in different ways as compared to the dominant written discourse of academia in the U.S.A.

Some other researchers emphasized international students' low language proficiency as one of the most important factors in their reticence in class discussions (Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Xu, 1991; Stolzenberg & Relles, 1991). Most American universities require a high score from TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) as one of the admission criteria; however, TOEFL may not be the best measure of students' English proficiency, or its scores may lack reflecting students' speaking skills in a high level classroom discussion (Seferoglu, 2001). Dunnett (1985) states that many international students can be good conversationalists in their daily life; on the other hand, they may have problems in participating in higher level discussions in a classroom setting. Emphasizing the language related problems of international graduate students, Gay et al. (1993) indicate that these students can read and write well but their speaking skills are not always at the desired level, they frequently apologize for their lack of speaking skills, some of them are reluctant to ask for clarification even if they do not understand what the teacher is talking about.

Coleman (1997) focused on the relationship between international students' actual language performance in real life situations and their TOEFL scores (i.e. their measured language proficiency). Results suggested that even international students who score high on TOEFL may be worrying about their language abilities while trying to accomplish social and academic tasks they encounter in real life. Corroborating Huang (1997) and Graham (1987), Coleman stated that international students' not only measured language proficiency but also perceived language proficiency may have a significant effect on their accomplishment of academic tasks. Xu (1991) conducted a study with 450 international students from three large American universities and found that international students' self-ratings of English proficiency were significant predictors of academic difficulties experienced by them; in other words, "TOEFL scores, the most commonly used measure of English proficiency and readiness for international students to begin their academic programs in U.S. higher education institutions, were not found to be significantly associated with the level of academic difficulty" (p. 567). Corroborating Xu, Stoyhoff (1997) states that in order to predict international students' success in U.S. colleges and universities, considering their use of strategies to learn new knowledge can be as crucial as focusing on their TOEFL scores.

International students in American universities generally need to master more than what they were taught during their formal English education process in their home countries. They need to master conversational and formal forms of English in order to continue their studies successfully; they need conversational English for their everyday and social life, and formal English for their academic success. In addition, being proficient in a foreign language requires not only learning the vocabulary and grammar, but also mastering the cultural rules of verbal and oral communication. In order to use the language of the new culture successfully, international students need to learn cultural rules of spoken language such as pauses between speakers, the volume of the voice, knowing the acceptable amount of talk, turn-taking process; or conventions of written language such as writing a formal paper or using coherence devices and punctuation appropriately (Yildirim, 2014; Maza Duerto, 2004; Dunnett, Dubin, & Lezberg, 1986).

Kao and Gansneder (1995) conducted a questionnaire study to investigate the non-native English speakers' reasons for not speaking in class. Results of their study revealed five main factors effecting international students reticence in class discussions: negative classroom climate, problems with English, non-assertiveness, unfamiliarity with discussion content, and thinking that speaking is not required. Students who reported negative classroom climate as the main reason for not participating in class discussions said that professors and classmates are not friendly and professors are not open to comments. The ones who reported their problems with English as the first reason for not participating stated that they cannot express themselves in English, topics change too quickly during a lesson, and they are afraid of being laughed at for their poor English. Related to non-assertiveness, international students stated that they feel uncomfortable speaking in a group and they worry other people will think they are asking a simple question. Students who emphasized unfamiliarity with discussion content said that they are not familiar with the subject of discussion, their comments are unimportant and they are not interested in discussion topics.

Focusing on both international students and their professors, Helkinhelmo and Shute (1986) conducted a study to better understand language barriers of international students. Results revealed that even international students who are very proficient in English were having difficulties to fully understand the references related to cultural and historical events, acronyms, and idioms. Similarly, both Yao (1983) and Walfish (2001) suggested that even very common words such as 'capitalism' or 'evolution' might be carrying very different meanings for some international students. Corroborating these results, Chang (1996) stated that even very common daily language expressions such as 'How are you?' or 'I will call you later' may cause confusion for international students as they may tend to understand these expressions in their literal meanings only. Littlemore (2001) focused on the use of metaphors in American university classes and not only found that metaphors are frequently used in the classrooms, but also revealed that international students may be interpreting these metaphors in a significantly different way from their

professors' intentions.

Sawir (2005) focused on the underlying reasons of language-based challenges experienced by international students and suggested that most of their difficulties are based on their prior learning experiences which overemphasized structure and disregarded conversational skills. According to Sawir, there are many studies which describe the English-related problems of international students but they generally focus on the symptoms rather than on the underlying reasons. That is, most of the studies focus on language-related difficulties as they have been experienced by international students during their studies in the new social and/or academic environment but a better way of understanding the situation is to better understand the influence of international students' prior learning experiences as well as their beliefs about learning. Sawir (p. 570) states that "unless researchers focus on the whole learning biography of the international students, they will not fully understand the difficulties faced by both these international students and their teachers. Further, by focusing merely on the language difficulties occurring after the student arrives in the English speaking country, it is implied that the solution of those difficulties lies solely with the students concerned plus the institutions in which those students are studying. But their previous institutions of study in the students' countries of origin, and in many cases the government responsible for these institutions, also have responsibilities".

International students in the U.S.A. come from different educational systems. That is, there are differences between the American educational system and the educational systems of many other countries in the world (Yildirim, 2014). International students bring with them different rules and expectations about both education and classroom behavior. American instructors and students also bring their own educational expectations, rules, and assumptions to the classroom (Yildirim, 2014; Mathews, 2007; Stone, 2006; White, Brown, & Suddick, 1983; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Dunnett, 1981; Eland, 2001; Dunphy, 1999; Liberman, 1994; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Andersen & Powell, 1991; Day & Hajj, 1986). Kaikai (1989) and Jones (1999) suggest that knowing cultural background is very important for understanding the reasons of international students' reticence. Philosophy, objectives, and practice of different educational systems are rooted in their social demands, cultural foundations and traditions. Therefore, both expected behaviors and educational outcomes of particular educational systems generally correlate with their cultural traditions and educational philosophy. Studying in a new academic culture requires adjustment to different methods of research, different behaviors of instructors, new methods of teaching, and different expectations of students by instructors (Yildirim, 2014; Bennett, 1999; Dolan, 1997; Fox, 1994).

Different educational systems have various types of status for the teacher in the classroom. Robinson (1992) states that in American classrooms the status difference between students and professors may not be completely apparent, but it is actually expressed in subtle ways such as choice of words or tone of voice. On the other hand, in many educational cultures teachers may expect to see ultimate obedience from the students because of their status in the classroom, but in American classrooms students are both encouraged and expected to challenge their teachers (Yee, 1995). In addition, some international students may think that the focus of their efforts should be on understanding information from their professors' lectures, and these students may expect that the information they need and the answers to their questions should come from their professors directly, correctly and naturally. However, this situation may cause both confusion and frustration among some American professors because they are used to receiving critical questions from their students and they look for the ways of encouraging classroom discussion. As a result, some American professors might interpret some international students' passive involvement and silent responses as a failure to meet the participation requirements of their courses (Yildirim, 2014; Kim, 2005; Wang, 2004).

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Setting and Participants*

The data for this study were collected from a graduate-level research class at a university in upstate New York. In this class students were not expected to conduct research, but they were expected to understand different types of studies in social sciences, and their appropriate applications. It was not a crowded class, there were only seven students in the class. Three of the students were American, their names were Elizabeth, Stephanie and Jane (all the names are pseudo-names), and they were all speaking English as their native language. The other four students were international students, they were all non-native speakers of English. Two of them were from China (Xuan and Sang-li), one of them was from Iran (Leyla), and one of them was from Sudan (Kerim), (all the names are pseudo-names). It was the first research class for all the students; in other words, the students were equal to each other in terms of subject knowledge background. Before each class, students were required to complete the assigned readings and post some questions to a discussion board on the internet. All the students had posted their questions for each observed class, which indicates that they all had completed the assigned readings of each observed class before

coming to the class. Participants' informed consent about the observations was taken before collecting the data.

### *3.2 Data Collection and Analysis*

Main source of data for this study was classroom observations. Three classroom sessions were observed and field notes were taken during observations. Each classroom session took around seventy minutes. In addition to observations, two of the international students were interviewed after all three observations were completed. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

There were two phases of the data analysis process. During the first phase, field notes were reviewed after the observations and general categories of classroom participation were identified. During this phase, the focus was not on the differences between American and international students, it was on defining the ways of classroom participation all the students were following. When the observations were completed, all field notes were reviewed once again and five general categories of classroom participation were identified.

The first category was the 'short answer/example' category. Student participations which fit in this category were one-word or a short-phrase answers or examples given to the instructor's questions. For example, when the instructor asked "How many subjects participated in this study?", the answer coming from the students was "forty-six" or "forty-two females". These kinds of student participations were put under the 'short answer/example' category. The second category was the 'explanation' category. Student participations which fit in this category were explanations which consisted of at least a couple of sentences uttered as an answer to a question asked by the instructor or as a comment given to contribute to an on-going classroom discussion. For example, when the instructor asked "What kind of threats are there to the validity of this study?", the given answer consisted of at least a couple of sentences. These kinds of participations were put under the category of 'explanation'. Sometimes students simply asked to the instructor or to their classmates to repeat or further explain the last thing s/he said. These kinds of participations were considered under the category of 'questions to the instructor/classmates for clarification/repetition'. Sometimes, instead of asking simple clarification/repetition questions, students asked questions related to the topic being discussed. These questions generally raised further discussions in the class. These kinds of questions which triggered further discussions in the class were put under the fourth category: 'questions to raise discussion'. The fifth category was 'answer/explanation assigned by the instructor'. Sometimes the instructor asked a question and named a specific student to answer that question. Student participations coming after such a specific assignment of the respondent were put under this category.

The second phase of the data analysis process was to further analyze the field notes. After defining the five main categories of class participation in the first phase, the data were further analyzed in order to see the differences between American and international students in terms of their class participation according to these five categories. In this phase, a class participation table was prepared for each observed class and the number of times each student participated by using each participation category was identified.

The data coming from the interviews were reviewed after finishing the analysis of field notes, and used to better understand the reasons why the international students used some certain participation categories more than the others.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Results of data analysis revealed three main differences between American and international students' class participation in the observed graduate classroom setting. The first main difference involved the first category (short answer/example) and the second category (explanation). The second main difference involved the third category (questions to the instructor/classmates for clarification/repetition) and the fourth category (questions to raise discussion). And the last main difference involved the fifth category (answer/explanation assigned by the instructor). Figure 1 presents the total number of each participant's class participation according to five main categories by the end of three observations.

### *4.1 Differences Related to Short-long Answers to Instructor's Questions*

In all the observed classes the instructor generally preferred a question-answer type of teaching, the reason for this was most probably the nature of the course. Since it was a course aiming at helping students to understand different types of research studies in social sciences, several research reports were discussed during each observed class. The instructor generally asked questions related to the research reports being discussed, and he constructed his lecture upon the answers coming from the students. The instructor asked a lot of questions to involve students in the teaching process. Focusing on the answers coming from students to instructor's questions, it was observed that American students answered more questions which required an explanation than international students did.

Conversely, international students gave more answers to the questions which required short answers (one-word, or one-phrase). Figure 1 presents this difference between the two groups. Looking at the bars indicating the number of ‘explanation’ type of participation, we see that American students’ bars are much longer when compared to the bars for international student. On the other hand, looking at the bars indicating the number of ‘short answer/example’ type of participation, we see that international students’ bars are much longer than American students’ bars.

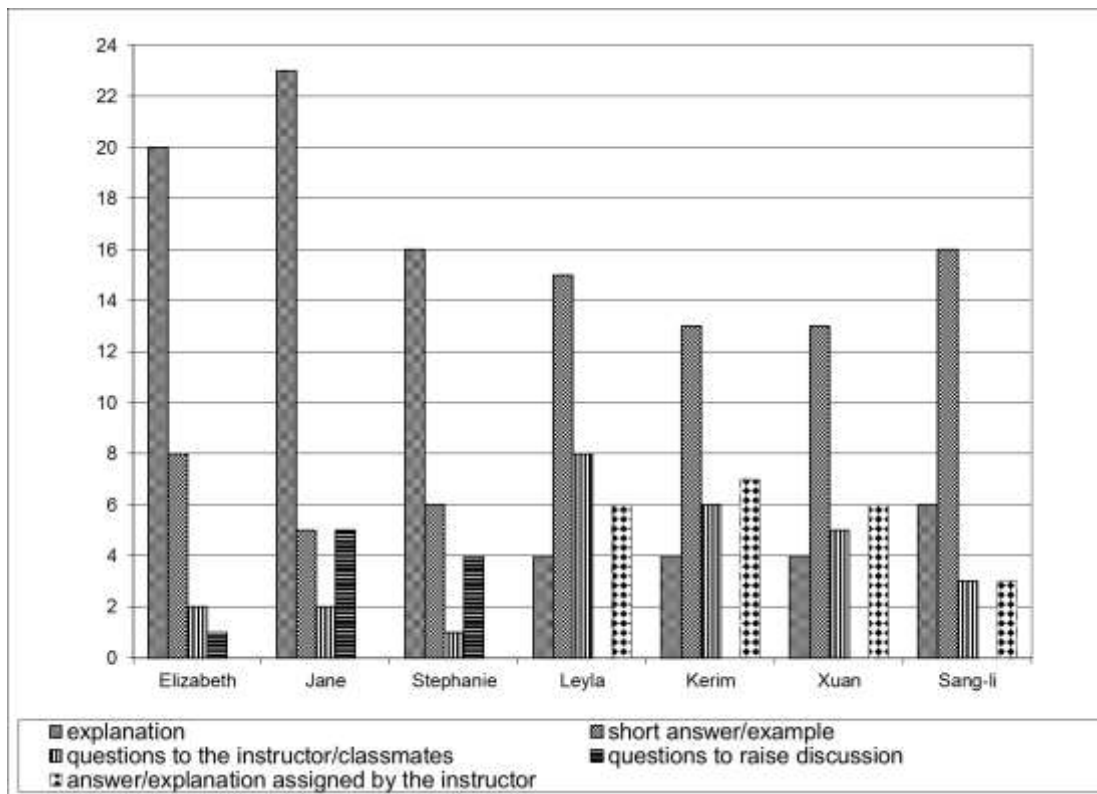


Figure 1. Participants' total class participation according to five categories

The reasons why international students prefer answering more short answer questions may be explained by their language proficiency related concerns. Following are two extracts from the interviews which support this idea:

*“I think language is an issue here because sometimes you are just afraid of answering a long answer question because you are not sure whether you could use the correct vocabulary or not.”*

*“Most of the non-native speakers are worried whether they are conveying the meaning clearly, whether they are expressing themselves clearly, also some of them are caring about their pronunciation.”*

Several researchers emphasized international students' low language proficiency as one of the most important factors in their reticence in class discussions (Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Xu, 1991; Stolzenberg & Relles, 1991). Dunnett (1985) states that many international students may have problems in participating in higher level discussions in a classroom setting although they can be good conversationalists in their daily life. Kao and Gansneder (1995) list main factors effecting international students' reticence in class discussions and low English proficiency is one of those main factors. The international students in their study who reported their problems with English as the first reason for not participating in class discussions stated that they thought they could not express themselves in English, topics change too quickly during a lesson, and they are afraid of being laughed at for their poor English.

To summarize, the first big difference between the international and American students' class participation in the observed graduate class was that American students answered more explanatory answer questions whereas international students answered more short answer questions.

#### 4.2 Differences Related to Questions Asked by the Students

The second main difference between international and American students' class participation was observed in the way they are asking questions during the class sessions. There were basically two kinds of questions: (a) questions that are directed to the instructor or to a classmate to ask him/her to repeat or further explain what s/he has just said, (b) questions that are asked to the instructor or a classmate to raise a discussion or to contribute to an ongoing

discussion. The observations revealed that international students never asked second type of questions in the class, the only questions they asked were the first type of questions (Figure 1). On the other hand, most of the questions asked by American students were second type of questions.

Then, it can be said that international students generally asked for clarification but they did not prefer questions that can raise discussions in the class. On the other hand, American students very rarely asked clarification questions, their questions were mostly discussion raising questions. Although asking for clarification can directly be related to language barrier, for some students culture and educational background can also be effective on this issue. Some of the international students might not be used to asking discussion raising questions just because they were not encouraged to ask such questions in their native educational environments. The following extracts from the interviews support this idea:

*“I ask questions only when I don’t understand something, actually even in those cases I wait for someone else to ask a similar question and I ask it only if nobody asks.”*

*“Asking discussion questions during the lesson is the teacher’s job I believe, students should ask questions only when they don’t understand something. That’s the way it is in my home country.”*

Studying in a new academic culture involves a lot of adjustment including different behaviors of instructors, different expectations of students by instructors, and new methods of teaching (Kung, 2007; Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007; Dunn, 2006; Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Bennett, 1999; Dolan, 1997; Fox, 1994). Kaikai (1989) and Jones (1999) emphasize the importance of cultural background for understanding the reasons of international students’ reticence. Some American professors might interpret some international students’ silence as failure to meet the participation requirements of the course as they may be used to getting critical questions from their students and they may be looking for the ways of encouraging classroom discussion; on the other hand, some international students may be expecting that the information they need and the answers to their questions should come from the professors correctly, naturally, and directly; these students may also think that their efforts should focus only on understanding information coming from the lectures (Wang, 2004).

Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) state that students coming from collectivist cultures may be less likely to actively participate in debates; and therefore, some international students from collectivist cultures may avoid actively participating in class discussions. For example, a group of Asian students in Liberman’s (1994) study reported that classroom interaction was not encouraged or sometimes not even allowed in their home countries but it was required in the American classrooms, which was something they highly valued but also caused discomfort to them.

#### *4.3 Differences Related to Questions Assigned by the Instructor*

During the observed classes the instructor assigned many questions to a student before asking it. For all these questions, assigned student was always an international student. Figure 1 shows that none of the American students has a bar related to the fifth category. That is, the instructor never assigned a question to an American student before asking it. This was another big difference between American and international students in terms of class discussion. Answers given to instructor-assigned questions was defined as a category of participation because, interestingly, all the questions assigned to the international students were answered correctly and contributed to overall classroom discussion. In other words, this was another type of classroom participation although it was started by the instructor.

Results related to this category indicate that although they seem reticent during class discussions, in fact international students generally have the potential to contribute to class discussions. Maybe all they need is a little bit more thinking time to organize their ideas. The following extracts from the interviews emphasize this point:

*“Non-native speakers cannot be answering so quickly, and it is definitely to do with the language, I mean the connection between the thought and the language, it is not so smooth.”*

*“Actually I believe I can answer relatively all the questions asked by the instructor, but I need some time to organize the ways of giving the answer. I mean, I can’t answer a question as fast as my American classmates but it doesn’t mean that I can’t answer it at all.”*

### **5. Conclusion**

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. First of all, although some international students seem to be actively participating class discussions by answering and asking questions, the questions they are answering can mostly be short answer questions which require using just a word or phrase, and the questions they are asking can mostly be clarification questions. Therefore, professors should be careful about not only the quantity but

also the quality of international students' participation in order to involve them more actively in class discussions.

Second, not answering the questions, or not taking turns during class discussions does not always mean that international students really have nothing to say. Sometimes they might need just a little more thinking time to organize their ideas. Professors should consider these issues while directing class discussions. Assigning some questions directly to some students, and giving them some thinking time might be a useful strategy.

To conclude, international students in American classrooms have great potential for academic and multi-cultural contribution to learning environments. Professors who have international students in their classes may make the best use of that potential if they follow some of the following strategies suggested by Tompson and Tompson's (1996): (1) discussing expectations and questions by having an individual meeting between international students and instructor, (2) forming and using small groups in a particular class to help international students speak up more easily and get to know both each other and their American peers better, (3) using more visual aids in lectures, and (4) discussing stereotypes as well as cultural differences in class in order to create a non-threatening learning environment.

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