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Are They Ready to Participate? East Asian Students' Acquisition of Verbal Participation in American Classrooms

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This study investigates seven East Asian graduate students' acquisition of verbal participation competence in American classrooms. By examining the acquisition process, the study focuses on the factors that deactivate participants' intents to participate, the strategies they develop to realize these intents, and the moments that signal readiness to participate. Participants' struggles, strategies, and moments at which they participated were analyzed at four phases over a two-year period through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and participant observations. Cross- and single-case analyses of the data were conducted, and a complex mix of affective, cognitive and situational factors was identified. The analysis suggests that participants are challenged more by cognitive factors than by cultural factors in the acquisition process. Metacognitive and sociocultural strategies work interactively and shape effective access to full participation membership. A case is made for language teaching to treat cultural conventions of participation from an acquisitional perspective.

INTRODUCTION

East Asian students have increasingly become the majority of international students on university campuses. Because of their perceived cultural characteristics, such as collectivist values and a fear of losing "face," and their recognized reticence in classrooms, they have become a focus of classroom-based research over the past few decades. Along this line, a body of research has investigated factors that influence students' inactive verbal participation in classrooms, such as culture, language proficiency, and affective aspects (Adamson, 1990; Chen, 2003; Jones, 1999; Kim, 2006; Liu, 2001, 2005; Morita, 2000, 2004; Tsui, 1996). Researchers agree that culture and language proficiency are the two major factors that contribute to East Asian students' reticence in class. However, the existing literature has not examined the strategies these students use to increase participation, how these strategies change over time in the absence of explicit strategy instruction, and the moments in which students are indeed ready to participate. An understanding of the development of students' classroom participation strategies would seem vital for teachers to have in order to better include students in class discussions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last two decades, researchers have used cross-sectional investigation, literature review, and longitudinal exploration to identify the factors that contribute to East Asian students' passive or reserved verbal participation in English-speaking

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classroom settings, especially during class discussions. These factors include whether the reticence results from students' negative attitudes towards English as a medium of communication (Liu & Littlewood, 1997), students' lack of language proficiency (Cheng, 2000; Kim, 2006), students' identity differences, including cultural characteristics (Jones, 1999; Morita, 2000; 2004), and students' different perceptions of classroom participation (Chen, 2003; Chu & Kim, 1999; Inoue, 1999; Jackson, 2002; Kim, 2006; Liu, 2001, 2005).

In two large-scale surveys of Hong Kong university students' attitudes toward English lessons, for example, Liu and Littlewood (1997) conclude that students adopt not a negative but a positive attitude towards participation in classroom discourse. This finding is validated by multiple recent studies (e.g., Cheng, 2000; Kim, 2006), which show that East Asian students' attitudes towards class participation are positive. Synthesizing the literature on East Asian students' perceptions of silence in academic group discussions, Jones (1999) argues that students' "slowness" in participation is a cultural characteristic of East Asian students, who will and do participate but appear "slow" because they need a moment's reflection. Cheng (2000) argues, however, that East Asian students' passivity and reticence derive not from pre-set cultural principles but from situational factors, for example, teachers' unsuitable methodologies, lack of rapport between the teacher and students, or learners' lack of proficiency in the second language (p.442).

Other studies have examined the process of engaging in class participation. For example, Liu (2001) investigated 20 East Asian graduate students' communication patterns in content-based courses in U.S. academic settings. He labels the process of gaining participation as "competence adaptation" (p. 224) and identifies six classroom communication patterns that contribute to this adaptation process: for example, not all East Asian students are silent participants in American classrooms; the American peers' active classroom participation mode in general has a positive impact on East Asian students' communicative patterns; and teaching style, lesson type, and class size are more crucial to East Asian students' participation modes than are variables like their academic majors.

Other researchers have explored the learning style differences of different cultures (Charlesworth, 2008; Jones, 1999; Liu 2001). Their research attributes East Asian students' classroom reticence to a learning style cultivated in their home culture and declares that students' cultural learning style needs to be transformed in an English-speaking classroom. For example, in investigating learning style differences associated with cultural backgrounds, Charlesworth (2008) finds that an active learning style is less embraced by East Asian students, including Chinese and Indonesian students, who tend to prefer a reflective learning style, as they tend to take time to contemplate things, listen carefully to others, and try not to impose their opinions on others.

The literature reviewed above shows that researchers have made significant attempts to explore the diverse reasons behind students' quiet and passive behaviors in academic settings. The factors identified, such as attitudes, language pro-

ficiency, perceptions, learning styles, and cultural characteristics, are interrelated and complex. Though cultural differences do exist in the process of engaging in classroom discussion—for example, it is important and valuable in East Asian cultures to respect silence and reticence—these cultural components are beyond the focus of this study, which focuses on the strategies that learners use to become more active participants in the classroom. In doing so, it takes an acquisitional point of view, which assumes that competence in the American classroom verbal participation style[1] is naturalistic and implicitly acquired, developed through learners' observations and experiences. The view further assumes that the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors identified in second language acquisition (SLA) research will also affect full participation in similarly complex ways.

Simultaneously, this study intends to offer a cognitive explanation to the cultural argument that East Asian students' slow responses or "thoughtful pauses between and within turns [indicate that they] simply need two or three seconds to structure a sentence" (Jones, 1999, p. 252), whether speaking in English or in their native language. This explanation is basically missing from the current literature on the topic, though mentioned in Liu's study (2001, 2005).

Furthermore, researchers such as Liu & Littlewood (1997), Jones (1999), and Tsui (1996) have suggested excellent pedagogical techniques to motivate learners' participation in class discussions. In examining how students actually develop an active participation style, this study provides research against which these techniques can be evaluated.

This study, therefore, explores the following three research questions:

(1) What are the situational factors that impede East Asian students' classroom verbal participation?

(2) What are the production strategies that students use to increase their classroom verbal participation?

(3) What are the situated moments that signal East Asian students' readiness to participate in class discussions?

METHODOLOGY

To uncover patterns of students' participation behaviors regarding situational factors, production strategies, and situated moments, this multiple case study triangulates data from a variety of sources: questionnaires, emails, semi-structured interviews, and participant observations. The study documents learners' thoughts about, efforts toward, and struggles with daily class participation across the curriculum while in the process of completing a two-year Master of Arts (MA) program, and it reveals their developmental strategies as well as transformations in participation. Their two-year experience is coded as four phases that respectively correspond to the four academic semesters of their program.

Participants

Seven East Asian Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) MA students participated in this study at a middle south U.S. university from fall 2006 to spring 2008. These participants—the only international students entering the master's program that fall—were approached after a new students' orientation and all later formally volunteered to participate. They were from four countries: China (Danna, Kathy, Yan), Japan (Masako, Yusuko), Korea (Jung), and Taiwan (Joy). They were also all female, which was representative of the cohort of students in the TESOL program; no male students had been admitted in the fall 2006 cohort. The students met university admissions language requirements (Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), paper-pencil test, 550, or International English Language Testing System (IELTS), 6 points or above). Their average age was 23.6 years old. They were all in the United States for the first time and were all in the first year of their studies. Four of them had just graduated from college when the study started, and the remaining three had worked for 2-4 years in middle schools before their enrollment. By the end of this project, six of them graduated from the MA TESOL program. One of them, in the third semester, transferred to an undergraduate nursing program, which did not interrupt the data collection. All names provided are pseudonyms.

Data

The data consist of observations, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and email correspondence. This paper primarily focuses on the analysis of the questionnaires that were collected at four different phases, as well as on the final interview, because these two data sets sufficiently reveal the process and significance of the development of their participation competence. The quotations cited in the results section are from participants' questionnaire responses except where noted.

Six of the participants were observed every two weeks for 15-20 minutes in two courses per phase (semester) throughout the four phrases. On average, 14 observations were completed for each participant. Danna, who transferred to nursing, was observed for two phases only, but she continued to provide responses to questionnaires and interviews during the last two phases. In the observations, special attention was paid to participants' self-initiated questions and responses in class discussions and to situations that motivated them to speak spontaneously.

A questionnaire was given to all participants in the last week of each semester and was collected one or two weeks later. The questions elicited participants' responses about particular efforts, struggles, strategies, attempts, participated situations, and goals that they experienced, accomplished or thought about during that phase, as well as the frequency (e.g., more than two times per class) with which they typically participated in class. An example of a questionnaire prompt was "Are you still trying to participate in class discussions this semester? Yes or No? Please describe." Eight or nine prompts were included on each questionnaire. (See the

Appendix for a typical questionnaire)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the beginning of the first phase and at the end of the last phase. Each interview lasted around 35 minutes. In particular, the first-phase interview, with five questions, aimed to elicit participants' concerns, struggles, and expectations about class participation (for example, "Do you experience any concerns when you are trying to speak in class discussions?") The fourth-phase interview, with eight questions, identified participants' progress, transformations, effective strategies, interpretations of observed behaviors, and concerns that have not been resolved (for example, "Do you feel comfortable/confident participating in class discussions now?" "In some classes, I observed you contributed more verbal participation—asked questions or argued with peers. Do you have any explanations for that?").

Finally, email prompts were sent out twice per phase to collect students' reflections on their on-going struggles, reflections, and thoughts about their participation. Examples of email prompts were "how do you feel about your recent classroom participation?" and "Are you experiencing any struggles or difficulties?" The length of their responses to the prompts tended to be brief, from three sentences to one short paragraph.

DATA ANALYSIS

Based on guidelines for coding qualitative data (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Geisler, 2004; Patton, 2002), I started with an open coding procedure, using a joint deductive-inductive approach to code the responses to the questionnaire prompts, classroom observations, and interview data, with the themes in my research questions as a guide. The linguistic and extra-linguistic factors influencing SLA and social learning established my theoretical framework (see, e.g., Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Kasper, 1997; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Long, 2007; Pienemann, 1989; Rose, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

After each participant's data were coded, all codes were compared and clustered by patterns of (1) struggles, or situational factors that challenged students' attempts to participate; (2) production strategies, which students used to make consistent and conscious attempts to increase their participation; and (3) "ready" moments, or situations that stimulated students' genuine participation and intents to participate. In this analysis, a pattern was counted if it represented a minimum of four repeated occurrences across four participants' reports about the same behavior. To identify the commonality and variability across participants, I composed a narrative of each participant's experience over the four phases of the study. A cross-case analysis of patterns and themes will answer Research Questions (RQ) 1 and 3, while single-case analysis of variations in strategies will answer RQ2 and offer additional evidence for RQ1.

The concept of "readiness" to participate originates from Pienemann's (1989) teachability hypothesis, which claims, "Teaching is ineffective (i.e. impossible)

since SLA can only be promoted when the learner is ready to acquire the given items in the natural context" (p. 61). According to Pienemann, "readiness" indicates that learners are developmentally, internally, and, especially, linguistically mature enough to learn, as well as sequentially close to the stage of being taught. This study does not explore linguistic readiness; rather, it uses the concept of teachability to identify signs of readiness that engage students in class discussions and facilitate the development of their participation "competence" (Liu, 2001) from a sociocultural and pedagogical point of view.[2]

RESULTS

In this section, results will be reported for each of the three research questions. First, the patterns of and variability in struggling factors common to all participants are reported. Second, the individualized production strategies of one participant are presented to illustrate their role in her growing sense of membership in the classroom. Finally, "ready moments" are presented that signal situations in which participants are genuinely ready and willing to participate.

Struggling Factors

Struggles are defined as situational factors that challenge participants' intentions and attempts to speak or respond in class. The sources of struggles are complex and can be psychological, linguistic, pedagogical, cognitive, cultural and/or situational. Participants' struggles to acquire participation competence in classrooms support their attempts to gain "membership" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morita, 2000, 2004; Tsui, 2007; Wenger, 1998) in the class community.

Five patterns of struggles, shared by the group, are presented below. Three forms of variability in struggles are subsequently reported to show individual differences in the process of developing participation competence. To make the patterns accessible to readers, direct quotations from participants' questionnaires are provided.

1. Self-pressure

Self-pressure means that participants forced or tried to force themselves to contribute to discussions. Every participant created strategic forms of self-pressure to push herself to participate in class, especially at the initial two phases. At the moment before participants engaged in discussions, they had to decide whether to keep their heads up or down, avoid or receive instructors' eye contact, or speak in a low or a loud voice. The struggle is further illustrated in the following comment: "I always fought to myself inside who is very passive. Sometimes I failed to fight with myself who wants to be quiet and responsive." (Jung)

2. Native-speaker peer pressure

All seven participants in the study reported that various degrees of struggle came from a form of self-pressure, comparing themselves to their native-speaker (NS) peers. These comparisons to NS peers' active participation put implicit pressure upon themselves, either motivating them to participate (Liu, 2001) or intimidating them and thus keeping them from participating. In their descriptions, participants constantly measured the frequency of their participation and quality of performance against that of NSs. Whereas Liu found that American peers' active participation impacted East Asian students' communication patterns more positively than negatively—in that NS' self-initiated verbal responses were "stimulating and encouraging" (p. 185) of East Asian students' participation—participants in this study found their native-speaker peers' responses more intimidating than encouraging. Participants' were intimidated by factors such as the perception that NSs were evaluating them, NSs' fast speaking speed, NSs' mode of active participation, and the proportion of NSs in the class. Participants experienced these pressures to a more significant degree in the first two phases than in the last two. This pattern was repeatedly documented in five participants' questionnaire responses. For example, Joy reported, "I was afraid of being judged by NSs. They think my English is not as good as a graduate student."

3. Conceptual fluency

Conceptual fluency (Kecskes & Papp, 2000) refers to knowing how the target language reflects or encodes its concepts on the basis of metaphorical structuring and other cognitive mechanisms. It depends on how fast a learner can make sense of and integrate the concepts he or she hears and reads. Danna's response to a question about struggles she experienced in participating (see Question 6 in the Appendix) is a good illustration of this type of struggle: "Not because I could not listen carefully and clearly, for each word I know the meaning, but when come to a sentence, I just found them so abstract and I was struggling with understanding them clearly."

All participants experienced similar constraints in conceptual fluency, noting that they had trouble formulating quick, well-organized responses to normal-speed discussion questions and that they need time to process, and sometimes translate, what instructors and peers were saying: "It took time for me to make English sentences" (Masako). "I need time to organize and translate them in English in my mind" (Joy). "I was slow in organizing thoughts and slow in expressing in English" (Yan). "I need time to process the questions asked by the professors" (Jung). A further analysis of the data shows that each participant experienced this barrier more often in Phases 1 and 2 than in Phases 3 and 4.

Struggling with conceptual fluency is not rare, but the literature on East Asian students' participation has not adequately considered it as a factor that delays learners' participation. Though Jones (1999) and Charlesworth (2008) argue that East Asian students need pauses or time to think and reflect, they count this

phenomenon as simply a characteristic of culture differences, as discussed in the literature review section above. I propose that inadequate conceptual fluency in English is a major struggle for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and that this struggle is more cognitive than cultural: the participants have not achieved sufficient "conceptual blending" or integration (i.e., cross-space mappings between inputs, selective projection, generic spaces [Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 279]) of the language inputs from a cognitive point of view. This inadequate "blending" means that the participants need more reaction time to process second language (L2) information because their level of conceptual fluency in English is not as high as it is in their first language (L1) (Bialystok, 2006; Kecskes & Papp, 2000). A bilingual mind simply works differently from a monolingual mind in processing language input—whether one is a German student or a Chinese student learning a foreign language.

4. Discourse-level cohesion

Another pattern of struggle relates to the discourse-level cohesion of participants' responses. Participants struggled with organizing their thoughts in a logical and coherent manner to respond quickly, fluently, and substantially. They intended to say more but, due to concerns with accuracy, ended up speaking in shorter, more fragmented utterances, and they perceived this as holding back their full involvement in class. This dissatisfaction was repeated in four participants' reports from two different phases but mostly at the second phase. For example, Joy said, "When I said something, I said it with short answers. I hope I could say it with complete sentences." This struggle is consistent with the finding of inadequate conceptual fluency, which can hinder discourse-level responses, and can arguably be related to cognitive factors more than linguistic ones.

5. Context-free thinking skills

A further area of concern is context-free thinking skills. Context-free (Kecskes & Papp, 2000) is another term for context-reduced (Cummins, 1984), which means a limited degree of contextual support for expressing or receiving meaning in communication. Cummins argues that interlocutors rely heavily, even exclusively, on linguistic cues to meaning, and, thus, the successful interpretation of the message depends heavily on knowledge of the language itself. The analysis shows that students consistently worried about the correctness of their answers and questions, which confirms the findings of Jackson (2002) and Tsui (1996). Participants did not want peers and instructors to think that they are not smart. On the surface, the concern seems attributable to low confidence or high anxiety. But a deeper analysis suggests that there is an association between their concern for "correctness" and their perception that NS peers are negatively evaluating them. For example, Joy reports that before she speaks up, she notes the following: "I will ask myself several questions, Is it a right answer? Does it sound silly? I really wanted to answer them when instructors asked questions but I still withhold

my opinions, I was afraid of making mistakes or saying something that sounded silly." Active class participation partly derives from one's context-free analytical thinking skills, which primarily rely on one's knowledge of the language instead of contextual supports. This finding invites consideration of explicit instruction to facilitate the development of these skills.

Variability in Struggles

In addition to the above five patterns of struggles, deviations were also observed that failed to form any pattern but raised interesting questions nonetheless. One deviation emerged in comparing the cases of Joy and Masako. In the first phase, Joy reported struggling with strongly perceived peer- and self-pressure while Masako reported making specific self-initiated efforts to improve participation. Yet after the two-year experience, both of them said that they did not achieve their goal of participation. In the final two phases, both stopped making specific efforts to increase participation and reported feeling comfortable just listening to the discussion without participating themselves. From this comparison, it is clear that Joy and Masako did attempt to develop their participation competence but that their differing interactions over the two-year experience changed their participation. This finding further reveals the diverse forms of participation, including that of "comfortable listener," that exist in the classroom discussion context.

Another deviation is a concern about over-participation. In the second phase, Jung reported that she was not aware of whether she was participating more than other international students because she focused on her own contributions to the class: "I didn't notice that I have participated in class more than any other international classmates for the first semester. I might have been too obsessed with participation in class or stolen others' chances to contribute their ideas in class." Jung's concern that she may have "stolen" other students' opportunities to participate—and thus participated too much—implies that active students also struggle with class participation. This finding seems to complicate the conventional assumption that more participation is better.

The final deviation is that of home-culture peer pressure. Peer pressure was observed not just from NS peers but also from same-culture peers. For example, Yusuko, who is Japanese, reported, "If there is another Japanese student in my class, I'm hyper-sensitive to the words and the content of discussion, especially to my contribution to the discussion. People in Japanese society feel uncomfortable toward someone who express too much. I do NOT want to offend other's feeling."

Overall, this variability in participation behaviors suggests additional directions for the study of participation. It invites the investigation of productions strategies, which is the focus of the second research question in this study and will be explored next, in order to identify implications of the variability identified and suggest potential solutions to the struggles with self-pressure, native-speaker peer pressure, conceptual fluency, discourse-level cohesion, and context-free thinking skills.

Production Strategies

The term "strategy" can be approached in a number of ways. For instance, Ellis (1997) emphasizes that learning strategies are "problem-oriented," in that the learner deploys a strategy to overcome some particular learning problem (p. 532). Cohen (2007) stresses the purposefulness and intentionality of using strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1999) categorize learning strategies into metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies depending on the type of processing involved. Building upon the discussion of the processing involved in the development of learning strategies, Oxford (1990) and Oxford and Schramm (2007) explored the relationship between learning strategies and different acquisitional stages; for example, at the stage of noticing, they believe learners use focal (selective) attention or global (general) attention to get information into working memory.

To examine production strategies from an acquisitional perspective, I combine the concept of strategy development (Oxford & Schramm, 2007) with the definition that "production strategies are used to accomplish communication goals" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1999, p. 43). I define production strategies as in use when participants make consistent and conscious attempts and efforts, either cognitively or socially, to increase participation frequency. Ultimately, these strategies help participants gain membership in class discussions.

Participants made consistent efforts to increase the frequency with which they participated. In each of the four end-of-phase questionnaires, all participants reported that they participated or attempted to participate in class. Jung's case, in particular, is one of powerful transformations in which the use of individualized production strategies helped her become an active member of or "full participant" in (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53) the classroom community.

Jung sought to change her membership status from peripheral participation (possessing "various forms of casual but legitimate access to a practice without [being subjected] to the demands of full membership," Wenger, 1998, p. 117) to full participation (possessing "access to three dimensions of practice, to mutual engagement with other [class] members, to their actions and their negotiation of the enterprise [content], and to their repertories in use," Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 100). Her significant transformation in participation competence is an example of "the changing relations between newcomers and old-timers in the context of a changing social practice [classroom discussions]" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). Jung, a "newcomer," transformed her relationship to the "old-timers," or NS peers, through her production strategies. At all phases, she monitored her intents to participate and the frequency with which she did so and then used these strategies to reflect on her participation in classroom interactions.

Jung was a high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher for four years in Korea before she entered the master's program in fall 2006. She came to the United States with a strong motivation to improve her English-speaking skills and seek professional training in TESOL. Throughout the entire experience, she

proactively sought to increase her participation in class. In the final questionnaire, she was the only student of the seven who said that she had achieved her goal of participation and felt confident participating in class. Her self-rating on a 1-5 point scale of participation satisfaction was 5, which indicates 90-100% satisfaction with her participation.

Jung's strategies were specific and local as well as manageable and effective. They were structured, restructured, monitored, and integrated through Jung's ongoing observations and interactions in classroom settings. Eight strategies are reported below.

1. Seek social resources

At the first phase, Jung sought social resources by, for example, emailing me to ask for advice about class participation. She wrote in her email, "This is Jung. Yesterday it was an interesting class. I tried to participate in discussion with you and other classmates actively but I felt I didn't do well. I don't know how to explain things well. But I'm sure I'll be better day by day. …I'm worried about 'I can't do my best?" (Email: Aug. 29, 2006).

As the message indicates, she attempted to participate and reflected upon her participation behaviors in class. In response, she sought social resources (my advice) for support. Jung's reflections show that she realized her initial attempts to participate but her degree of engagement was limited, which illustrates her position as a peripheral participant in the class community.

At the second and third phases, Jung continued to seek social resources and took advantage of class resources to increase participation. For example, in response to a question about her efforts to increase participation frequency, she reported, "I tried to make friends in class to make myself more comfortable and it did work for me."

2. Borrow peers' self-initiated strategies

Jung observed that her NS peers self-initiated their participation by raising their hands. After identifying this, she borrowed the strategy: "I noticed some classmates from USA raised their hands and waited for their turn to speak up in class… Once I noticed, I tried to use the way" (second phase). This observation indicates that her identification and negotiation of the meaning of raising hands is both relational and experiential (Tsui, 2007): she made this modification based on her experience with and observation of relevant participation situations.

3. Restructure borrowed strategies

Jung realized that imitating strategies such as hand-raising was no longer necessary as she increased her participation frequency. She said, "I raised my hands to participate, but later I felt I could participate without doing that, so I stopped doing that" (third phase).

4. Seize the right time to enter discussions

Jung noted that she needed to pay attention to the timing of discussions in order to judge the appropriate time to join in. Jung reported, "I tried to participate in class in a right time" (fourth phase). There is no doubt that this is an important conversational norm (Jones, 1999; Liu, 2005; Liu & Littlewood, 1997).

5. Process input by segmentation

To get involved in participation, Jung adopted an input processing strategy called segmentation (Oxford & Schramm, 2007) in which she parsed her verbal participation in a manageable manner. During early participation, she selected her attention consciously and directed it to manageable words and phrases rather than to unmanageable longer utterances or discourses. She reported, "I tried to speak up with at least words or phrases to say something and contribute to class" (second phase). These lexical and phrasal contributions are assumed to be indications of how Jung processed the discourse-level input she attended to in class. Though she may have perceived her participation as peripheral, she was approaching full membership in participation.

6. Give elaborated comments to others

Jung gradually restructured her segmentation strategy and added new strategies. She focused on giving more elaborated responses to peers' questions and comments. For example, she stated, "I tried to give longer and more detailed answers or comments to others, which worked" (third phase). This example indicates that her strategy is not just a result of her own attempts and monitoring but also a result of her interactions with the rest of the class and the instructor. Giving longer and elaborated answers to others sustained their recognition of her membership status as a full participant in class.

7. Initiate discussion questions

As Jung gradually increased the frequency with which she participated, she started asking questions and developing ideas to discuss. For example, at the fourth phase, she reported, "I tried to come up with ideas and ask questions." The association between learning strategies (pattern control) and the acquisitional stage (synthesizing information or integrating new information) (Oxford & Schramm, 2007) indicates that these questions and ideas required the ability to synthesize information and demanded better conceptual fluency in the target language. The use of this strategy reveals that Jung transformed the quality of her verbal participation, moving from providing responses of words and phrases to asking questions.

8. Monitor participation behaviors

Jung repeatedly reported that she monitored her own participation behaviors and frequency, which means that she constantly reflected upon what she said in discussions and revised her verbal contributions based on feedback from the

monitoring process. For example, she noticed that she participated more frequently than the other international students did. (Observations confirmed that she was the most active student among the seven participants.) She also noticed that she asked "impulsive questions" and made efforts to increase the quality of her participation: "I have acknowledged myself who is an impulsive asker this semester than the other semesters. I knew I asked some questions unrelated to the class sometimes. I realized that the quality of participation is more important than its quantity" (third phase).

Feedback from self-monitoring enabled her to restructure some techniques, such as sitting in the back of the room and looking around before she spoke so she could more easily see who was about to respond. She reported in the final interview that the strategy of self-monitoring turned out to be the most significant in her transformation to a full member of the class community.

In addition to Jung's individualized production strategies, other participants used unique combinations of production strategies to increase their participation frequency at different phases. For example, according to their responses to the participation effort and frequency questions (see questions 1 and 2 in the Appendix), Yan participated more frequently at the second and third phases. Yusuko reported a steady high participation frequency at each phase, but the recorded frequency in the classroom observation notes did not confirm her self-reported frequency, the only noted discrepancy between their self-reported frequencies and my observations.

Joy, Masako, and Danna's frequencies remained low, at fewer than one attempt per class. Elaborating on her reticence, Joy wrote, at the third and fourth phases, "There was not particular effort that I put" because "I feel more comfortable and relaxed to listen to my classmates' talk." At the third phase, Masako reported, "Not really, because there are many students in the class and I didn't really have to speak out." Taking all of the reported participation frequencies and efforts into consideration, it seems clear that each participant adopted a unique combination of strategies at different phases that evolved from individual interactions with participation situations and participants' own dynamic expectations for participation.

The production strategies discussed above suggest solutions to the learners' struggles to participate. This research, however, seems still incomplete without exploring when learners are ready to use the production strategies to help them participate. The following section will, as a result, explore the situated moments that signal students' readiness to participate in classroom discussions.

Situated Moments Signaling Readiness to Participate

A cross-case analysis of the data reveals that there are situated moments at which participants are ready and willing to "move gradually toward the other end of the (participation) continuum"—active participation (Liu, 2001, p. 178). Building upon applications of readiness and the teachability hypothesis (e.g., Kasper, 1997; Rose, 2005), I labeled the following four moments as situated moments, which signal when reticent students are ready to contribute to discussions after a

period of "silent observation."

1. When participating in learner advantage activities

"Learner advantage" activities favor learners' cultural backgrounds, create less peer pressure, and elicit individual students' skills and knowledge. They are observed to attract a high frequency of participation. Small group activities, recommended in the reviewed literature (Kim, 2006; Liu, 2001; Liu & Littlewood, 1997), are one type of learner advantage activity. All participants indicated their readiness to participate in small-group activities. For example, Kathy reported, "I could participate better in a small group than in a whole class." Learner advantage activities ought to pervade the entire curriculum, with teachers matching students' readiness for learning with targeted language instruction and the right type of class activity (Long, 2007).

2. When noticing that interlocutors wait for "slow" responses

The struggle with conceptual fluency, discussed earlier, explains learners' "slowness" in processing questions because they translate sentences into the first language, organize their thoughts, and then word their thoughts in English. As argued above, verbal participation is a developmental issue; viewing it as simply a cultural or linguistic issue does not give adequate attention to what is going on in learners' minds at critical participation moments. If instructors and peers allow longer wait time to support the development of students' participation competence, students will be ready to give responses. Longer wait time would prevent what Yusuko describes, and which was mentioned by three other participants: "If I wanted to say something, it was always too late because native English speakers could formulate their thoughts and answer before I could."

3. When experiencing a reduced peer-pressure setting

Evidence of struggles indicates that participants are concerned about peer pressure, especially in a classroom with a majority of NS peers. Participants in this study were intimidated by the dominance of the target language classroom culture and the number of native speakers. More specifically, they were intimidated by NS peers' speaking speed, quality of responses, and the possibility that NS peers were negatively evaluating their language ability. Liu (2001, 2005) argues that an environment of reduced peer pressure is helpful for students to improve their language proficiency. The benefit of reduced peer pressure is also implied in Wenger's (1998) discussion of how "lessened intensity," "lessened risk," and "lessened production pressure" (p. 100) can help one achieve full participation. Indeed, when the participants experienced reduced peer pressure, they did show willingness to participate. For example, Kathy said, "I was encouraged that my peers and professor won't judge me when I say something wrong in class." Joy, who made the least progress in developing participation competence, reported in the final interview, "I was inspired to say something in a class because this was a

small class and only one native speaker in the group." Her self-reported behavior was confirmed by classroom observations.

4. When conducting culture talk

Cultural topics are significantly welcome based on participants' responses to a question about situations that attracted their participation. Six out of seven participants stated that they preferred topics about their culture (e.g., customs, native language differences) or personal experiences (e.g., daily life, learning processes in school) because they "feel free to talk about their opinion" (Yan). Participants consistently expressed a strong desire to share their cultures with peers from other cultures: "Talking about cultural differences between each country, I was encouraged to participate because I'm one of the representatives from Japan. I wanted to share our culture. I feel good to talk about my culture" (Masako).

In sum, my analysis reveals four situations in which learners feel ready to participate in class discussions: when they participate in learner advantage activities, notice an interlocutor's longer wait time for their "slow" responses, experience a setting of reduced peer pressure, and engage in culture talk. These moments emerged not only from learners' questionnaire responses but also from observations and interviews. Grounded in the perspective of learners, not instructors, they provide a foundation of research that supports instructional techniques designed to increase classroom participation (Jones, 1999; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996).

DISCUSSION

Five major themes have emerged from this analysis. First, the five contributing factors that challenge learners as they struggle to participate are situational—the factors could vary based on instructors' pedagogical style, for example, or rapport between students and teachers in particular contexts—yet also cognitive (e.g., conceptual fluency, context-free thinking skills). This cognitive factor further develops Cheng's (2000) argument that the causes of East Asian students' reticence are situation-specific, and it suggests the need for pedagogical techniques to raise awareness of internal constraints on verbal participation, for example, slowness in processing language because of lack of sufficient conceptual fluency. The finding that participants seem to be challenged more by situational and cognitive factors that influence language production than by linguistic factors may indicate that the linguistic concerns of graduate students are not a primary issue at this level of learning.

Second, in identifying East Asian students' reticence as originating in cultural norms, researchers (e.g., Jackson, 2002; Jones, 1999; Tsui, 1996) have partly justified participants' "slowness" in responding and their fear of making mistakes. Yet these behaviors and perceptions are better accounted for as a cognitive feature of language learners than a cultural one. As the data indicate, students from different cultural backgrounds shared the same concerns with "slowness" in processing a

second language and "correctness" in their responses. This argument complements pedagogical recommendations such as instructing students in question-asking techniques (Jackson, 2002; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996).

Third, the NS peers' active participation is supposed to be positive or "stimulating and encouraging" (Liu, 2001, p. 185) for East Asian participants, but the participants in this study felt more pressure than encouragement. Perhaps because the participants are future ESL/EFL teachers, they have high expectations about participation and thus continually use NSs as models against which to monitor their own performance. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that Hong Kong Chinese students have "anxiety from high performance expectations" (Liu & Littlewood, 1997, p. 376). A heterogeneous group of students (from different language and cultural backgrounds) in an English-speaking country may also feel more peer pressure than a homogeneous group of, say, Korean students learning English in Korea (see Cheng, 2000).

Readers may wonder about how the issue of gender affects the findings, since all of the participants are females. (As mentioned above, no East Asian males were available to be recruited when the study started.) According to Weave and Qi (2005), there are two general views on gender issues in (college) students' classroom participation. One view states that classrooms favor masculine forms of communication, while the other view argues that students' gender has little effect upon participation. In their investigation of 1,550 college students' perceptions of participation, Weave and Qui found that gender has little or no effect on self-reported participation rates. In this study, on top of other social factors such as high performance expectations, gender could still have added pressure as a result of cultural identity, as "Asians in general, Asian women in particular, tend to be quiet, passive, timid, or indirect" (Morita, 2004, p. 597). None of the participants in this study, however, mentioned the issue of gender.

Fourth, the production strategies developed by Jung display more social and cognitive characteristics than affective ones. Jung took advantage of classroom social learning settings by seeking social resources and borrowing peer strategies, and she internalized her observations, feedback, and reflections throughout. The frequency with which she monitored and reflected on her participation significantly contributed to her growing sense of membership. Her procedures of monitoring and reflecting can be further defined as metacognitive strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1999) that supported her development of full membership.

Finally, readiness, identified from an acquisitional point of view, is explored through examining the moments when students are ready to participate. At each phase in the study, participants are not always ready to participate, as the struggling situations examined above show. But their consistent attempts to participate cannot be ignored, and their efforts reveal that they are willing and ready to participate. For example, they enjoy engaging in student advantage activities such as small group activities as well as sharing information about their home cultures with the class. If students observe that instructors and peers understand their "slowness" to respond

and create opportunities for them to respond, they are ready to contribute. This evidence indicates multiple ways to maximize students' participation (Skehan, 1998), though teacher style and lesson type are also crucial to student participation.

This study treats the development of participation competence as a component of second language learning. Cognitive and sociocultural perspectives intersected to provide an acquisitional view of the development of participation competence. Over the two years, participants experienced struggles that drove them to construct production strategies and develop readiness to participate. Though the extent of participants' transformation varies, each participant made progress: six out of seven participants reported at the final phase that they felt comfortable or very comfortable in class. They were willing to participate, they were no longer afraid of being called on, and they developed the courage to participate.

Yet comfort, willingness, and courage to participate are necessary though not sufficient conditions for verbal participation. The two participants (Joy and Masako) who reported little efforts to participate during the last two phases also reported that they had transformed from feeling peer pressure to being content to just listen to peers and not participate. In terms of developing confidence to participate, it seems that a two-year experience of intense professional education may not be sufficient for all learners. Confidence development may involve a set of more complexly interrelated factors such as a longer time spent immersed in the culture and more successful experiences with participation.

CONCLUSION

This study identified East Asian students' participation struggles, production strategies, and ready moments from an acquisitional point of view. Participants struggled with cognitive, psychological, cultural, and situational factors throughout the entire process, but cognitive factors such as conceptual fluency in the second language are significant contributing factors. This theme is repeated in Jung's successful metacognitive strategies for gaining membership. To some degree, this cognitive argument reveals the internal complexity of reticence. When considering student readiness, pedagogical materials should address how students process second language input and how instructors can create opportunities to include students in class discussions. The study also concludes that cultural explanations of East Asian students' reticence are not sufficient; a cognitive and developmental understanding of participation patterns to gain membership is necessary.

Six out of seven participants transformed from being passive and inactive in class to feeling comfortable or very comfortable to participate. The analysis of Jung's successful transformation shows that individualized social and metacognitive strategies worked together to enable her to gain membership as a full participant in the class.

This study also identified situated moments that signal when participants are ready to participate. Instructors play a crucial role in creating these moments to

include students in class discussions. Though the small, all-female sample limits the generalizability of the findings, it is hoped that the depth of the investigation and the micro-processing-oriented evidence explored offset this limitation. Directions for future research include studying more participants of both genders, investigating the frequency of successful production strategies to gain full participation, and analyzing videotapes of classroom interaction to examine how students behave at the moments when they participate.

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NOTES

[1] American classroom verbal participation style is defined by the participants of this study as being verbally active and initiating contributions instead of sitting quietly as good listeners and withholding self-initiated verbal responses. In addition, "verbal participation" excludes written and other non-verbal forms, emphasizing the number of utterances/comments that are orally contributed in classroom settings. This definition is adapted from Kim's (2007) examples of verbal and non-verbal participation in a study of East Asian graduate students' perceptions of active verbal participation.

[2] Applications of the teachability hypothesis are common in research on the development of L2 pragmatic competence (see, e.g., Kasper, 1997; Morrow, 1996; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990; Rose, 2005). Pragmatic speech acts such as apologies (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990), complaints, and refusals (Morrow, 1996) have been shown to be able to be learned through explicit instruction in supporting sociocultural contexts. Kasper's (1997) question, whether L2 pragmatics can be taught, and her critical analysis of different aspects of pragmatic competence such as pragmatic routines, speech acts, and pragmatic fluency, respond directly to the question of teachability in a manner that validates what RQ3 explores: the identification of situated moments that include reticent students in class discussions.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE (SECOND & THIRD PHASES)

1. If I ask you how often you take initiative to participate in class this semester on an average class basis, which of the following could best describe your participation: (please choose)
   A: Less than once per class, B: more than once per class, C: more than twice per class, D: more than three times per class, E. More than four times per class, F: don't know
2. Are you still trying to participate in class discussion this semester? Yes or No (please choose). If yes, please describe the kinds of particular efforts you made in class?
3. What are the efforts that worked satisfactorily in your standards?
4. What are the efforts that did not work satisfactorily in your standards?
5. Can you name some particular situations or topics or activities that attracted your participation?
6. Are there any struggles or concerns you have had so far in order to engage in class participation? If yes, please describe.
7. Will you still keep trying to increase the amount of participation in class? If yes, how? If no, please explain.
8. What is your final goal of class participation by the end of this program?

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