

# Enhancing Chinese Student Participation in TESOL Classrooms through Culturally Responsive Teaching

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## Abstract

Chinese students in TESOL classrooms often demonstrate low verbal participation, which is frequently misunderstood as a lack of language proficiency. However, this silence is deeply rooted in cultural norms that emphasize humility and respect for authority. This paper explores how Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) integrates students' cultural identities into instructional practices to address this issue. By examining cultural factors such as Confucianism, reviewing the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of CRT, and proposing targeted strategies like culturally relevant materials, modified group interactions, and inclusive teaching techniques, this study argues that Chinese students' participation can be enhanced without compromising their cultural identity.

## Keywords

TESOL classrooms  
Cultural Factors  
Culturally Responsive Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Culturally Responsive Teaching emphasizes the necessity of integrating students' cultural background into the teaching of academic knowledge and skills to enhance their learning interests and outcomes<sup>[1]</sup>. In the last thirty years, it has been widely used in Western educational settings and has proven to be effective.

The low participation of Chinese students in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) classes is often mistaken for a lack of language proficiency. However, in fact, it is the result of the influence of Chinese culture. Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching allows for a cultural understanding of what contributes to this phenomenon, which can then

be targeted to increase their engagement.

This essay explores strategies for applying Culturally Responsive Teaching to improve Chinese students' engagement in TESOL classrooms. First, it explores cultural factors affecting Chinese students' classroom participation, especially Confucianism. Next, it reviews Culturally Responsive Teaching and its practice. Finally, it proposes strategies for applying Culturally Responsive Teaching to enhance Chinese student participation.

This essay argues that Chinese students' reticence in the TESOL classroom is a culturally influenced response rather than a deliberate lack of cooperation or language proficiency. However, culturally responsive pedagogy, if utilized appropriately, can provide effective strategies

to promote students' courage to share their ideas and increase participation.

## 2. Background: Cultural Factors Affecting Chinese Students' Classroom Participation

Silence has long been used to describe classroom communication among Chinese students studying in TESOL classrooms. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that they have difficulty in the process of expressing themselves in English. This explanation, while plausible, overlooks the fact that these phenomena also occur in advanced English learners. Hence, language ability is not the key factor. This phenomenon is essentially influenced by deep culture, which has deep roots, guides us in our behavior, and does not change easily with changes in geography<sup>[2]</sup>. To be specific, it is Confucianism, which has been the mainstream of Chinese thoughts, politics, and culture for generations<sup>[3]</sup>. From the perspective of Confucianism, "listening attentively" is the primary task of students. Keeping silence shows students' respect for the teacher's authority and is also a sign of humility, which is regarded as a universal moral principle<sup>[4]</sup>.

Even when confronted with a difficult question, Chinese students tend to carefully choose to consult in private to avoid taking up class time. Yu pointed out that Confucianism has shaped people's expression mode in front of the public, and the "moderateness" it promotes is like a black hole that swallows people's words, and people basically express themselves with the minimum words<sup>[5]</sup>. Nevertheless, Confucianism does not prohibit speaking altogether; instead, it encourages students to share mature opinions on areas they are familiar with for the benefit of others.

When the silence caused by cultural factors occurs in the language class, it seems that the teacher is the only active person in the class, which is undoubtedly embarrassing and discouraging for the teacher. After a certain point, both teachers and students get tired of this one-sided interaction. In the TESOL classroom, such silence is obviously unwelcome, and it will undoubtedly seriously affect the teaching effect because language learning precisely needs participation and interaction.

## 3. Theory and Practice: Culturally Responsive Teaching and its Practice

Gay introduced the concept of Culturally Responsive Teaching, which she described as the integration of students' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and ethnic perspectives into the teaching of academic knowledge and skills<sup>[1]</sup>. Culturally Responsive Teaching is based on differentiated instruction and advocates for connecting the information being taught to the student's ancestral and current culture<sup>[6]</sup>. When academic knowledge and skills are taught within the context of the student's experience, they are more engaging and easier for students to master and are more likely to increase student motivation to learn.

Additionally, the introduction of Culturally Responsive Teaching creates opportunities for teachers to gain insight into the cultures that influence students' lives and to understand the cultural causes of student-curriculum gaps. By making an effort to understand students' cultures and identities, teachers are able to establish a positive and inclusive classroom culture that creates relevant learning opportunities<sup>[7]</sup>. Culturally Responsive Teaching has been practiced over the past several decades in a variety of disciplines within the Western education system and has proven to be effective in increasing achievement while maintaining the cultural integrity of students<sup>[8]</sup>. Vinogradova and Kang note that although culturally responsive teaching did not originate for language instruction, it has important implications for English language education (ELE) in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries<sup>[9]</sup>.

As a proven teaching strategy, under the guidance of Culturally Responsive Teaching, to address the issue of low participation of Chinese students in TESOL classrooms, it is possible to understand the reasons for the low engagement at the cultural level and then to enhance their participation while maintaining their cultural identity.

## 4. Strategies for Applying Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to Enhance Chinese Student Participation

### 4.1. Familiarize Yourself with the Student's Cultural Background in Advance.

Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching requires

teachers to learn about students' identities, cultural backgrounds, and other information in advance as part of their teaching preparation. Such knowledge is necessary because teachers should not limit their judgment of students to their own cultural context but also refer to the cultural context of the students. As mentioned earlier, Chinese students' low level of participation is more likely to be characterized by not answering questions or actively participating in group discussions than by not listening to lectures or completing homework. With enough preparation, teachers will understand that culture is actually at work behind these behaviors and habits. Furthermore, students may be motivated by a desire to be humble and friendly, fearing disruption of the classroom by being overly active, rather than by a desire to embarrass the teacher by being uncooperative. One of the misconceptions about Chinese students' lack of interaction is that they lack language skills and specialized knowledge, which can make teachers reflect on whether they should adapt the content to their students' level. However, based on an understanding of the students' cultural backgrounds, teachers can more easily recognize whether the lack of participation is due to the students' cultural factors or lack of language proficiency, and make adjustments accordingly.

#### **4.2. Teaching Content Incorporates Elements of Chinese Culture.**

Gay points out that teaching and learning are influenced by individuals' a priori knowledge, such as family and community language, educational experiences, and folklore related to learning. Therefore, teachers should make appropriate adjustments to utilize Chinese students' own cultural resources fully<sup>[10]</sup>. When students realize that their prior knowledge is not useful at all, they will inevitably feel frustrated and thus less engaged. Therefore, in the TESOL classroom, Chinese elements can be added to attract students' attention. For example, when teaching about western administrative regions such as federal, state, and county, teachers can add the names of the corresponding Chinese administrative regions to aid students' understanding.

In addition, teachers should be sensitive to the festivals and customs of Chinese students and send appropriate wishes on important festivals. Doing so

will make students feel respected, bring them closer to the teacher, and increase their sense of belonging to the classroom, which in turn will increase their engagement.

#### **4.3. Utilize Teaching Strategies to Stimulate Student Participation.**

In Chinese culture, boastful people are usually viewed as superficial. Influenced by this, Chinese students often resist sharing their opinions verbally, but this is limited to verbal expression. This means that teachers can make adjustments to address this characteristic of students, for example, by allowing students to share their opinions in writing, or anonymously, in order to alleviate the psychological burden of verbalizing them.

Introducing interactive quiz games such as Kahoot, Quizizz, etc. can also increase the fun of answering questions. In addition, grouping can be adjusted to increase students' participation. For example, when the class is full of Chinese students, students with learning experiences in English-speaking countries can be assigned to each group. Because of the influence of Western culture, these students tend to be more active in answering questions, and their vitality can motivate other group members.

### **5. Conclusion**

The low participation of Chinese students in TESOL classes is often mistaken for a lack of language proficiency. Nevertheless, this is the result of the influence of Chinese culture. Confucianism, in particular, emphasizes silence as a sign of respect for authority. Although "culturally sensitive teaching" originated in the West, it can be adapted to provide practical solutions to the problem of low engagement of Chinese students. By adding Chinese elements to the content and using alternative methods of participation, teachers can enhance the interaction and cultural inclusiveness of their classrooms.

In addition, understanding students' cultural backgrounds helps teachers distinguish between cultural and non-cultural behaviors and thus respond more appropriately. In conclusion, Culturally Inclusive Teaching provides a helpful reference for increasing classroom engagement of Chinese students while respecting their cultural backgrounds.

**Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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