

Equalizing Classroom Participation

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The purpose of this study was to determine if an activity involving primary and secondary responders (PRs and SRs) would help graduate students in an English language teaching practicum participate in discussions of a particular student presentation, the rehearsal. The 15 students in the practicum, which included ten whose first languages were not English, taught eight-week intensive English as a foreign language courses at two universities in Thailand. Five questions were investigated: 1) Did the use of PRs and SRs ensure that all class members participate in discussions of rehearsals? 2) What were the students' reactions to the PR-SR activity? 3) Did being a PR help the student focus on what the presenter was saying? 4) Did the possibility of being a SR help class members focus on what the presenter was saying? 5) Did the PR-SR activity help students participate in discussions in other graduate courses? The data were collected by means of two surveys. The findings demonstrate that the students believed that the PR-SR activity equalized classroom participation, that they liked the PR-SR activity, and that it helped them to focus on the presenter. The experience of being PRs and SRs did impact some students' subsequent participation in other graduate courses.

Keywords: classroom participation, second language teacher education, student silence, English language teaching practicum

Introduction

A challenge often facing university instructors is ensuring participation in classroom discussions. This challenge may be exacerbated when the class has students whose first languages are not the language of instruction (e.g., Campbell, 2007; Cheng, 2000; Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Major, 2005; Nakane, 2005; Tani, 2005). It is not uncommon for discussions to be dominated by a few students, with a number of students seldom, if ever, making contributions to the discussions. Reda (2009), in discussing student silence in American university writing classes, observes that there are “students who do not volunteer to speak in class; students who seem uncomfortable, even resentful, when called on; students who appear unwilling to speak to partners and small groups...” (p. 2). However, university students, particularly graduate students, are often expected, if not required, to engage in oral academic discourse.

There is a considerable body of research into student silence and willingness to communicate (WTC) in second and foreign language classrooms with Asian learners of English. Liu and Jackson (2008), for example, investigated the unwillingness of Chinese students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) to communicate in English language classrooms. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) researched the antecedents of WTC of Japanese adolescent learners of English. Harumi (2011) and King (2013) investigated the nonparticipation of EFL university students in Japan. Zhang and Head (2010) reported the study of the strategies of a teacher of oral English in China to increase her students’ classroom participation. Xie (2010) investigated the reluctance of first-year English majors in a Chinese university to speak in class. The reasons for student silence found in these studies include the fear of being negatively evaluated, concern for their level of competence in the foreign language, and culture.

There is also research of Asian students in university settings where English is the medium of instruction. Morita (2004) reported her qualitative multiple case study of the participation of six Japanese female graduate

students in a Canadian university. Nakane (2005, 2006) and Ellwood and Nakane (2009) investigated Asian students in Australian university settings. Of particular interest is Morita's study of classroom participation of both non-native and native-English speaking graduate students in a TESL program in Canada. She reported that "academic discourse socialization should be viewed as a potentially complex and conflictual process of negotiation rather than as a predictable, unidirectional process of enculturation" (2000, p. 279).

The present study also concerns graduate students who were both first and second language speakers of English. They were enrolled in an English language teaching (ELT) practicum at an American university which was taught in Thailand. The aim was to determine if an activity that used primary and secondary responders (PRs and SRs) equalized participation among graduate students in the ELT practicum in discussions of a particular student presentation, the rehearsal. Five questions guided the focus of the research:

1. Did the use of PRs and SRs ensure that all class members participated in discussions of rehearsals?
2. What were the students' reactions to the PR-SR activity?
3. Did being a PR help the student focus on what the presenter was saying?
4. Did the possibility of being a SR help class members focus on what the presenter was saying?
5. Did the PR-SR activity help students participate in discussions in other graduate courses?

The Study

This study investigated the use of PRs and SRs in a practicum for graduate students in the Department of Second Language Studies, University of Hawaii. The practicum (SLS 690) is an elective course for students in either the master's or doctoral programs. For five years, students enrolled in the practicum taught EFL courses at Ubon Rachatane University (UBU),

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Thailand. They also taught EFL courses at Ubon Rachatane Rajabhat University in the fifth year. The practicum class met at UBU twice a week for three hours each time for eight weeks.

Two of the required activities of the practicum are the rehearsal and post-rehearsal. Here is a description of these activities from the course syllabus:

Rehearsals and Post-rehearsals: The purpose of this assignment is to give you an opportunity to present to your classmates what you *plan* to do in your class. Lesson plans and other teaching aids should be copied and distributed. Critical discussions follow rehearsals. You should plan to have a post-rehearsal in the form of a follow-up report in class after the lesson that was rehearsed is actually taught. You will rehearse a lesson in class at least twice during the course.

The discussion that follows a student's rehearsal is important, as it helps the student get valuable feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the planned lesson. However, it had been my experience that relatively few class members offered their reactions to the rehearsals. Usually only certain students would respond. Many students were silent and only responded if called on directly by me. I felt that this was unfortunate as all the class members were teaching Thai university students and were in a position to offer valuable feedback on their peers' lesson plans.

In order to deal with this situation and to prevent it from becoming a routine in the future, I designed the PR activity prior to the fourth year of the practicum at UBU, and put into it the syllabus. When I first introduced the PR activity, I explained that the PR could:

- make comments
- ask questions
- offer suggestions
- lead class discussion when finished responding to the rehearsal

I developed a PR schedule for every meeting of the practicum that there

were rehearsals scheduled. Before each rehearsal, I designated a student to respond to the rehearsal. So that everyone in the class knew prior to each rehearsal who the PR was.

In the eighth and final week of the practicum in the fourth year at UBU, I reviewed the use of the PR. While it had been effective, from my point of view, in that all class members had been PRs and had made substantive contributions to the discussions of their peers' rehearsals, I wanted to learn if the students had the same reaction. An informal survey showed that they felt that all class members did participate in discussions following the rehearsals and that it equalized classroom participation. So I decided to use the PR activity in the next year.

As I had done the fourth year of the practicum at UBU, I developed a PR schedule in the fifth year at UBU and initiated it in the first week. During the second week, I realized that the use of PRs might have an unintended consequence. That is, once a student had been selected as the PR for a rehearsal, the other students might not listen as attentively and carefully as they might if there were no PR. Consequently, I expanded the PR activity to include a follow-up responder, which I called the Secondary Responder. As is the case with the PR, the SR could:

- make comments
- ask questions
- offer suggestions
- follow-up on something the PR addressed or raised

In addition, I decided to have the PR select the SR after she or he had finished responding to the rehearsal. That is, no one knew who the SR would be until the PR was finished responding to the presenter and selected a classmate to be the SR. This was intended to avoid the possibility of the lack of attention to the rehearsal. Then, when the SR was finished responding, the PR would lead the class discussion. At the beginning of the third week of the practicum, I introduced and explained the use of the SR.

Participants

In the fifth year of the practicum taught in Thailand, there were 15 graduate students, eight females and seven males from six different countries including Japan (2), Korea (4), Oman (1), Taiwan (2), USA (5), and Vietnam (1). One had completed one year of the doctoral program, while the remainder had completed their first year in the MA program. Their teaching experiences ranged from no experience to eight years of experience.

In the final week of the practicum, I gave the students a survey that asked them to comment on the use of PRs and SRs (see Appendix). There were statements about PRs and SRs with a Likert scale of 1 to 4 (strongly agree; agree; disagree; and strongly disagree). The survey was voluntary and done anonymously. Fifteen surveys were completed and returned.

Approximately six months later, the 15 participants responded via email to a second survey about all of the activities and tasks done in the practicum. There were three statements about PRs and SRs with a Likert scale of 1 to 4 (strongly disagree; disagree; agree; and strongly agree):

1. In looking back at the use of primary and secondary responders in 690, I believe that they helped to ensure that all class members participated in the discussions of rehearsals.
2. Before taking 690, I did not participate much in discussions in my SLS graduate courses.
3. The use of primary and secondary responders in 690 has helped me to participate in discussions in my SLS graduate courses.

The survey also asked the participants to explain their responses to the three statements. Since the second survey was done via email, it was not done anonymously. This allowed a follow up with the students about their responses if clarification was needed.

Results

Question 1. Did the Use of PRs and SRs Ensure that All Class Members Participate in Discussions of Rehearsals?

The first statement on the second survey addresses this question:

1. In looking back at the use of primary and secondary responders in 690, I believe that they helped to ensure that all class members participated in the discussions of rehearsals.

Fourteen students either agreed (2) or agreed strongly (12) with this statement. One student disagreed with the statement.

Question 2. What Were the Students' Reactions to the PR-SR Activity?

Table 1 presents the results of five statements from the first survey. As can be seen from the responses, a strong majority of the 15 students liked the use of both the PR and SR. In response to the statements about being either a PR or SR was stressful, approximately half reported that it was.

TABLE 1
Students' Reactions to the PR-SR Activity (n=15)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I like the PR activity.	2	8	4	1
I like the SR activity.	0	11	2	2
Being a PR was a stressful experience.	4	4	4	3
Being an SR was a stressful experience.	3	4	5	3
The SR activity is a waste of time.	3	2	6	4

Some of the comments they made include:

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I like the PR activity because it helps me pay attention to what the presenter was saying.

It (PR) was a good activity.

I like the PR but sometimes the PR would over take (sic) the floor.

The PR activity definitely helped me pay attention to the presenter, but I did not like it. I felt that the PR was forced to comment even if they didn't have anything useful to say.

I liked listening to the PR because they have very thoughtful comments.

I think the PR activity is beneficial.

I like the SR activity because it makes me concentrate all the time.

SR was good because it was after the PR. So the SR got things more clear and knew what to discuss.

The function of PR makes sense. But an SR/PR combination leaves potential for 2 people who do not have clear comments or questions for presenter to dominate the feedback time. The SR is not needed.

Question 3. Did Being a PR Help the Student Focus on What the Presenter Was Saying?

This question can be answered by looking at the students' responses to two statements on the first survey, as shown in Table 2. It is obvious that the students believed that the use of the PR helped them pay attention to the student who was presenting a lesson plan.

TABLE 2

Students' Reactions to the PR Focusing on the Presenter (n=15)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Being a PR helped me focus on what the presenter was saying.	11	3	0	1
When I was a PR, I paid more attention to the presenter than I did when I was not a PR.	9	5	0	1

Question 4. Did the Possibility of Being a SR Help Class Members Focus on What the Presenter Was Saying?

Two statements on the first survey address this question, as displayed in Table 3. Like the use of the PR in helping to focus attention on the presenter, the SR did exactly the same. This result clearly shows that the use of the SR brought about the desired change in student attention: With the SR, students paid more attention to the presenter than they did before the SR was introduced.

TABLE 3

Students' Reactions to the SR Focusing on the Presenter (n=15)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The possibility of being an SR made me pay attention to the presenter than before the SR component was introduced.	5	8	1	1
The combination of the PR and SR helps everyone focus on the presenter.	3	9	2	1

Question 5. Did the PR-SR Activity Help Students Participate in Discussions in Other Graduate Courses?

The purpose of this question was to see if being PRs and SRs in the

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practicum would generalize the students' participation to other graduate courses after the practicum, when they returned to the University of Hawaii. The second and third statements in the second survey were used to answer this question:

2. Before taking 690, I did not participate much in discussions in my SLS graduate courses.
3. The use of primary and secondary responders in 690 has helped me to participate in discussions in my SLS graduate courses.

Of particular interest are the replies of the students who agreed with #2. Six students self-identified as not participating much in SLS graduate courses; none of these six students had English as their first language. Of these six, four, in replying to the number 3, agreed that being PRs and SRs helped them participate in oral discussions in subsequent SLS courses, while two said there was no impact. Of the four who said that the PR-SR activity helped them, three explained their responses:

Whenever I became primary responder/secondary responder, everyone was paying attention to me and responding to my questions and opinions. This encouraged me that I don't have to be shy in discussions in my other SLS courses. Nowadays, if I have an idea, I speak up. Also, I show that I'm paying attention to the speakers in discussions by nodding and expressing interjections.

Those two activities forced me to contribute with my ideas and comments which were appreciated by others and this added to my confidence to discuss in other classes.

Now I know that the class members are generally open to others' opinion, and that gives me more freedom in saying my opinion.

Of the five students whose first language was English, one reported that

the PR-SR activity did affect subsequent classroom participation but in an unexpected way. This student said that her participation in subsequent SLS courses decreased somewhat:

I would really like to learn from my classmates and if I am talking the whole time, I miss out on my classmates' sharing of their knowledge through experience.

Discussion

The main aim of the study was to investigate whether the PR-SR activity would help all class members to participate in discussing the rehearsal. The results from the first statement of the second survey clearly show that students believed the activity did that. The written comment by the one student who disagreed seemed to contradict the Likert response of that student:

The responder system allowed everyone in the class to at one time or another to be a primary or secondary responder. This ordered system provided the opportunity for those who don't like to stand out, or prefer introversion, passive learning, to become leaders. I feel it also gave administrative power to responders to guide the discussion as they saw fit.

This finding becomes even more important when linked with the finding to the second question, viz. the majority of the students reported that they liked the PR-SR activity (see Table 1). There may be a number of reasons why the students liked it. First, for both the PR and the SR, there is no *right* or *correct* response. This is in direct contrast to many teacher-generated questions, when teachers have correct responses that they want students to give.

Also, the PR's and SR's tasks are clearly defined. They know exactly what they need to do so there is no ambiguity about the situation. The PR responds to the presenter with a comment, a question, or a suggestion. The SR can do the same and also follow up on something the PR might have addressed.

Then, when the SR is finished, the PR leads the subsequent class discussion.

Next, the PR and the SR frame their remarks to the presenter – to the classmate who did the rehearsal. This means that the students listen to each other rather than performing for the instructor. This encourages class members to engage in genuine dialogue, where ideas are developed, explored and even challenged through the words of their peers.

In addition, the PR-SR activity allows students to add their voices to the academic discourse safely without fear of disapproval or rejection by classmates. Here is what one student whose first language was not English wrote about her participation in SLS courses:

I have been always shy in discussions in my SLS courses. I was just afraid if I speak up wrong opinions. But it helped in 690.

The activity legitimizes the PR and the SR, giving them the authority, power, and responsibility. Accordingly, the risk of loss of face is low. So engaging in classroom discussions is a low-stake, not a high-stake, risk. In a sense, then, the activity is emancipatory as students are able to reposition themselves in the academic community of the practicum and make genuine, substantive contributions.

In looking at the third question, *Did being a PR help the student focus on what the presenter was saying?*, the responses from the class as shown in Table 3 convincingly demonstrate that the PR did indeed do this. So not only did the use of the PR equalize classroom participation, it helped the students focus on the student presenting his or her lesson plan.

The use of the SR did what it was designed to do: Help the students pay attention to the presenter (Table 3). This means that the possibility of being a SR eliminated the unintended consequence of the use of the PR – students not paying attention to the presenter when they knew they would not be the PR.

The responses to the fifth question, *Did the PR-SR activity help students participate in discussions in other graduate courses?*, are surprising. The literature on student reticence and willingness to participate in oral

discussions shows that it is a complex topic with a variety of causes, including personality, safety, teachers' style, topic, classroom environment and, for those whose first languages are not the language of instruction, culture and language proficiency. Thus it would be unrealistic to expect that a single classroom activity, such as PR-SR, would somehow generalize to other classrooms. Thus it is unexpected that this did occur with four students either agreeing or strongly agree that the activity helped them to participate in discussions in other courses in their graduate work. This finding is very encouraging, particularly in light of the fact that these four students did not have English as their first language.

One of the two students whose first language was not English and who said that the PR-SR activity did not impact her subsequent oral participation in other SLS courses did report that the activity influenced her oral participation in other activities of the practicum, as discussed above. This result is somewhat similar to what Morita (2000) reported in her study of the discourse socialization of nonnative- and native-English-speaking graduate students. She investigated how the students acquired the oral academic discourses necessary to perform a spoken academic presentation. She found that some of her students felt that successfully doing the oral academic presentation encouraged them "to participate in class discussions more extensively than they would normally do" (p. 305).

In addition, one other finding is of significance: One student whose first language was English reported that the PR-SR activity made her aware of the value of silence: "...if I am talking the whole time, I miss out on my classmates' sharing of their knowledge through experience." Further research in this area is definitely needed.

Conclusion

Before concluding, some limitations of the study need to be addressed. First, the data for the investigation only included graduate students in a practicum taught in another country. Future research could investigate if the PR-SR

activity could be used effectively in other graduate courses and in disciplines other than second language teacher education. Also, the use of the activity in both ESL and EFL and other language courses could be investigated.

The important contribution this study makes to the existing literature is that classroom participation can be equalized by an activity that students like. Student silence is a complex topic, and it is encouraging to find an activity that encourages students to engage in classroom discourse safely and without fear of rejection by their classmates.

The Author

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Appendix

Primary and Secondary Responder Questionnaire

Part I. Primary Responder (PR)

A. Please use this scale in responding to the six statements.

1=strongly agree 2=agree 3=disagree 4=strongly disagree

- _____ 1. Being a PR helped me focus on what the presenter was saying.
- _____ 2. Being a PR helped me understand the presenter better than when I was not a PR.
- _____ 3. When I was a PR, I paid more attention to the presenter than I did when I was not a PR.
- _____ 4. Being a PR was a stressful experience.
- _____ 5. The PR is an effective activity for ensuring participation by all class members.
- _____ 6. I like the PR activity.

B. Please comment on the PR activity.

Part II. Secondary Responder (SR)

A. Please use this scale in responding to the six statements.

1=strongly agree 2=agree 3=disagree 4=strongly disagree

- _____ 1. The possibility of being an SR made me pay more attention to the presenter than before the SR activity was introduced.
- _____ 2. Being an SR was a stressful experience.
- _____ 3. The use of an SR is an effective activity for ensuring participation by class members.
- _____ 4. The SR activity is a waste of time.

- _____ 5. The combination of the PR and SR helps everyone focus on the presenter.
- _____ 6. I like the SR activity.

B. Please comment on the SR activity.