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## Shhh... silence... is normal in Transnational Higher Education classrooms

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Internationalisation via partnerships and collaboration appears to be the way forward in western higher education and is also developing fast in Asian countries. One growing area of collaboration is part-time Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) courses where western 'flying faculty' academics from 'exporter' universities in, for example, the UK or Australia, 'fly in' to the Eastern 'importer' country to deliver teaching, and then 'fly back' to their country and their role in their university after one or two weeks of intense teaching.

Such western higher education institutions collaborate mainly with Asian countries where strong cultural factors continue to affect local society. Asian countries embrace the courses because they lack their own part-time options to provide students with an opportunity to gain higher qualifications and prestige. However, in the TNHE classroom environment, during the intense teaching periods, the silent behaviour of Asian learners that brands them as passive is of concern to the flying faculty academics who are more used to outspoken confident students who generally ask questions during class, with only a few quiet listeners approaching the academics at the end of the session (Bista, 2011).

Edward Hall, an anthropologist and one of the founders of the study of intercultural communication, outlined in his book *The Silent Language* (1959) that culture-specific behaviours and views of the world are influenced by unconscious cultural rules and contextual patterns. Hall's beliefs were relevant at that time and are also applicable now within the contemporary globalisation trends in higher education. In TNHE classrooms, students conduct themselves on the basis of their own values, beliefs and models: it is important that this is understood as different values and beliefs might be concealed, but they influence students' mind-sets and impact on their conversations and behaviour in the classroom.

This thought piece will suggest the reasons for the silence in the Malaysian TNHE intercultural classroom environment. It is important that tutors appreciate and understand the reasons behind students remaining silent despite their ascribing such importance to academic achievement. As Elbert Hubbard stresses, 'he who does not understand your silence will probably not understand your words'.

Within Asian culture, hierarchy is respected. The culture of listening to learn, of deference to authority, of 'saving face' of the teacher is strong: Hierarchy is respected: teachers are therefore not to be criticised or challenged. There is no debate. Customary ways and practices show that students apply respectful listening and attention when the teacher speaks.

Questioning to make sense of or to justify knowledge is done in private to save the reputation of the academic. The acceptable way of interacting with authority is by showing respect and has been ingrained within communities. Thus, the direct influence behind students' classroom behaviour is that attending and listening to those in higher ranking results in difficulties in being extrovert.

A lack of intercultural awareness on the part of western academics creates difficulties in conversations and influences students' behaviour and expectations; often it leads to miscommunication and misunderstanding in the classroom, on-line forums and email exchanges. Although Asians are familiar with English, it is not their first language. Furthermore, their spoken English often freely incorporates a mix of words from the languages of the diverse ethnic groups' mother tongues.

From my research study of Malaysian nurses studying on TNHE programmes, I found the nurses realised that, because they lacked understanding, they did not know what questions to ask. Also, cultural and language barriers meant that questions were not understood - or were misunderstood - and so students often received a response which did not answer their question. Miscommunication was also evident when questions were asked as some students found it difficult to understand a pronounced western accent or to cope with English as the medium of instruction.

The students also wanted to 'save face' as they felt they may be perceived as 'stupid to ask the question'! To avoid others considering them stupid, they kept quiet. The culture of consensus means there is always the fear or potential for repercussions if the person in authority is challenged. All this results in acceptance of what is occurring in the classroom.

A key impediment to students connecting with the academics was the feeling of inequality. Past colonial influence and the idealised merits of western education, so deep-rooted in their minds, affected them. Students felt an inferiority complex in having a westerner come to teach.

Despite their silent behaviour in the classroom, Asian students are determined and resolved to attain their qualifications. There is an accepted assumption and a sense

of security among Asians that not being active in the classroom does not mean lack of academic ability. Similarly, participating in class does not indicate academic prowess. Their focus is on knowledge as the main goal of learning and they behave in the TNHE classroom exactly as they would in an Asian classroom.

From my study, the Malaysian nurses' TNHE experience proved more demanding than students had expected, compared to their previous class contact hours and pace of teaching delivery. They felt challenged when their previously proven styles of learning (e.g. memorisation to pass exams) have been replaced by a diversity of teaching and learning styles. They perceived that the modular framework of TNHE delivery worked against what they understood to be good learning and teaching practices - too much subject knowledge was being taught within an unrealistically short time-frame.

Students are keen to maintain their national identity and cultural systems and to be firmly rooted within the Malaysian context. It is important that western academics are aware both of their own revered values and of the students' unconscious and conscious ideals in order to assess their behaviour and ways accurately. Only then can contextually appropriate strategies be developed to teach knowledge that relates across cultures.

Silence is an integral part of Asian communication. It is important that western academics understand the reasons for the polite, silent behaviour in the TNHE classroom as it can be attributable to the acceptance of power difference, an inferiority complex and the need and acceptance to conceal negative emotions in order to maintain social harmony. Mainly, the reluctance to participate in the classroom seems to be due to classroom etiquette as preferred and defined by the home culture rather than the approach to learning or ability.

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