
**Synopsis of “Ethnic Styles in Classroom Discourse”**

The loss of a leading figure, Charlene Sato, has lead to a variety of projects to commemorate her life. This synopsis looks at one of her many publications, a study carried out in 1982, which dealt with interethnic communication styles and its relationship to participation in the ESL classroom. The present paper will first summarize her study and then address some of the issues Sato introduces in the article.

Charlene Sato used two ESL classrooms as a basis for an exploratory study on the relationship between ethnicity and patterns of participation in student-teacher interaction. She addressed the questions of “whether ethnic patterns of participation were observable, as aspects of turntaking, and whether interruption behavior differed with respect to a learner’s ethnic background” (p. 14). Her primary concern was with Asian and non-Asian patterns of classroom interaction. Sato did not get more explicit in her definition of Asian/non-Asian but did address the issue in her summary and conclusions in which she called for a redefinition of the dichotomy “into a set of categories accounting for each ethnic group represented in a class of learners” (p. 21).

Her participants were two groups of university ESL students and their teachers. She categorized the students into Asians and non-Asians, and males and females. The first group consisted of 23 students, made up of 17 men and 6 women. Of those, 15 were Asian and eight were non-Asian. The second group consisted of eight students, made up of four Asian men and four Asian women.

The first class was videotaped during discussion exercises directed by the instructor for three different 50-minute periods. The second class was audiotaped and in-class observation and coding collected. Both sets of data were coded and portions transcribed. Categories were set up according to commonly used classroom interaction analysis. Some
of these were general solicit, wait-time, response to general solicit, personal solicit, response to personal solicit, and self-selection. The quantification of the data was the calculation of frequency totals, which were then analyzed according to the differences in distributions between Asians and non-Asians. The chi-square statistic was applied to test for the significance of differences in the observed frequencies from expected frequencies.

With respect to the distribution of verbal interaction, there was a significant difference between Asians and non-Asians. Asians took fewer speaking turns than the non-Asians; this included responses to general and personal solicits and self-selections. She found the Asians’ participation to be generally dependent on teacher solicitation. She also found that the teachers, including the Asian-American teacher, also tended to interact less with Asians than non-Asians.

Four major areas Sato introduced in this study that allow for further research are: (a) the degree to which classroom participation accommodates or suppresses the various ethnic groups communicative development; (b) the need for instructors to modify their patterns of discourse to enable all students opportunities to talk; (c) the need for a longitudinal study of how various ethnic styles are accommodated or suppressed; and (d) the need for a study of ethnic styles and patterns of communication with native speakers outside of the classroom.

Implications for Teaching

In framing her 1980 study, Sato examined research done by Giles, Kernan, Michaels, Labov, Boggs, Watson, and Tannen and found that, although that research had laid a solid foundation for examinations of ethnic styles in classroom discourse, little attention had been directed toward adult learners. This study, undertaken early in her professional life, made a contribution to what was then the burgeoning field of ESL and is, today, a global field.

If, as Sato posited, there is evidence “...that speaking opportunities are important predictors of second language acquisition in and out of classrooms” (p. 14), the implications of this exploratory study for those who teach Asian students are tremendous.

American teachers, in general, view adult students as being in charge of their own learning agenda, yet Sato found that adult Asian ESL students’ “...participation was largely dependent on teacher solicitation...” (p. 17). Those students made far less of a contribution to classroom discussion than did the non-Asians. “Asian students felt a stronger need than did the non-Asian students to obtain a ‘go-ahead’ from the teacher before speaking” (p. 20).

The clear implication is that teachers trained to conduct classroom activities in a style consistent with Western thinking (i.e., independent reflection and reaction) will have to reconsider and readjust to what are definitely different expectations. “The point being
made here is that frequency of participation may be directly related to learners’ perceptions of the teacher’s pre-allocated speaking rights” (p. 20).

How should this readjustment manifest itself? In two ways, Sato suggested. The first is easy enough—make explicit to all students the standard of “egalitarian distribution: of classroom discourse.” The second, more difficult, calls for the teacher to take into account the Asian student’s attitudes toward classroom speaking rights and “…to modify their own pattern of discourse management…” (p. 21).

Sato’s greatest contribution in this article was in signaling, early on, the pedagogical necessity of appreciating the impact of culture on learners at any age and realizing how lack of attention to that impact can affect second language acquisition.

This study, conducted in what now appears to be the infancy of widespread interest in Asians and in English as an international language, offers insights which are valid today, fifteen years later. There can be little doubt that Sato foregrounded the cultural expectations of teachers and learners in multi-ethnic adult ESL classrooms and the ways in which those expectations are operationalized.

Implications for Further Research

This study of ethnic styles in classroom discourse pointed the way for future research on ethnic patterns of learner speech and how they are accommodated or impeded by classroom participation structure, and on the types and styles of classroom discourse regarded as appropriate by different learners. Since Sato’s exploratory study in 1982, considerable attention has been devoted to research on classroom communication, participation, and learning styles. There is also considerable debate on whether it is necessary for every ESL student to speak during class sessions in order to practice English. The question is: are those who are reluctant to speak hindered from learning English as rapidly or effectively as their more vocal counterparts? Both ESL teachers and researchers have addressed this issue.

The views range from Krashen’s allowance of a silent period, which allows speech to emerge naturally, to Gibbons, who argues that for some students’ speech never emerges naturally. Methods have been developed based on one or the other approach; others argue for a more eclectic blending of both approaches in the ESL classroom.

One researcher who took up Sato’s challenge to refine the Asian/non-Asian dichotomy was Akihiko Shimura, who published an investigation of Chinese/Japanese difference in turn-taking in an ESL classroom in 1988. Using Sato’s three turn types, general solicit, personal solicit, and self-selection, Shimura analyzed data from a series of classroom observations and obtained results consistent with the earlier study (Shimura, 1988). Research and commentary conducted since Sato’s 1982 study attest to the value of that study’s research-initiating function.
Sato was a forerunner of those researchers examining cultural styles of communication and how those styles relate to participation in the ESL classroom. The legacy of this modest study rests in the impetus it gave and continues to give to researchers and practitioners.

For those interested in determining the reasons for variable ultimate achievement in second language development, the role of interethnic differences in the presentation of self and, thus, the elicitation of input from and interaction with native speakers remains an issue of fundamental importance (Sato, 1982, p. 21).

References

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