“The Silent Student”

They are scattered throughout our classrooms but mostly parked at the back of the room and covered with a hooded sweatshirt protecting and isolating themselves from the learning interactive experience. They are the ‘silent students’. Presumably, they are without a voice and expression, opinions and enthusiasm, motivation and focus. Teachers easily can ignore them for they barely exist. However, despite the more obvious reasons for their sheltered behavior, shyness, humiliation, confusion, disillusion, lack of knowledge or preparation or just plain apathy, one less noted, but yet most important to examine, is their cultural background. Therefore it is imperative to elicit from all students information on their previous learning methods and classroom expectations and behaviors that may be contributing factors for their silence. Their fears and contrasting pedagogies should be openly addressed through meaningful dialogue as educators begin to implement the new challenges. However, there should be a comfortable atmosphere and sincere bonding between all involved in the classroom; otherwise students will hesitate to embrace their foreign academic environment. It is apparent that these students need our support and attentiveness even more to break down these barriers that prevent optimal learning. An interactive and collaborative environment has been proven successful in stimulating thinking while transferring knowledge through an engaging, interesting and painless process.

From the start I think of ways to bond with my students in order to create a comfortable and warm nurturing environment where they can begin to remove their hooded sweatshirts and to welcome the inclusiveness and collaboration needed that promotes and fosters a productive learning journey. I have implemented ‘wikispaces’ that allows the shy student to respond and begin a discussion on a student’s assignment. They also have a venue through ‘Stretching Minds’ on ‘wikispaces’ to post and write what they have found outside our class readings, but related, that can enhance our learning. Students somehow can write easily on-line as opposed to speaking aloud during a class discussion. They also feel more relaxed during a small group activity where students are given guided questions to workout based on a reading before it is widely discussed.

Another way that quiet students get involved is by writing what they are thinking during a 15-minute ‘free-write’ session at the beginning of each class. Usually before a topic is introduced, students will write what they already know about it and how they learned this. I then have them circle their best idea and read it to the class. The writing provides time that is needed to exercise and surface their critical thinking. Therefore, they are more prepared and able to share when they read what they wrote. On a few occasions, I have them exchange notebooks and read the other student’s intriguing idea. This relieves any embarrassment of perhaps sounding foolish to their peers because it’s not their own thoughts. In the meantime, the shy students are becoming more inclusive and accustomed to speaking out in class.

STUDENT VOICES: Interview Findings:
I asked 3 simple questions to a group of 30 ESL students who were predominantly Chinese International.

1. When teachers ask questions in the classroom how do you feel, what do you do?
2. Do you consider yourself an active/passive participant? Describe under what conditions, background and/or reasons.

EXAMINE SOME OF THE FOLLOWING:
- Teacher
- Class
- Peers
- Subject
- Comfort level
- Knowledge
- Attitudes
- Personality
- Confidence
- Culture

3. Do you see any value in student participation, why/why not?

Silent Students’ Voices:

12 students felt that they hesitate to answer for the following reasons:

“I am a little shy and nervous because I may not know the answer.”

“If the professor does not ask me to talk, I just want to avoid answer it because I feel students laugh at me.”

“My English is poor and I know students don’t understand when I speak and don’t do it.”

“I am not that good to provide an answer.”

“I am not prepared very well, I feel hesitation.”

“I am not sure my answer going to correct or not.”

“Because in this class their many student who can answer the question and get it right.”

“I feel nervous often. Because I’m afraid to make a mistake.”

“If I don’t know the answer, I will feel embarrassed.”

“I feel annoyed because maybe that day I feel sad and I don’t want to be involved in something. They will not stop and will ask Why? How? And so on.”

“If I am silent, it means I don’t know it.”

“I can’t find the words to express myself in English.”
“I am afraid I may not say my point of view very well.”

ACTIVE STUDENT RESPONSES:

“I feel okay because I came here to study and give an example of my opinion and it is the responsibility of each student.”

“I used to feel very nervous, dizziness, shake and even fainted a couple of times when I was a kid because I used to have very fond relationships with my former classmates and was afraid to fail in front of them. One day it just ended when I moved here. I always raise my hand if I have something to say.”

“If I am not an active learner, I will get an ‘F’.”

“I am engaging in the class.”

“I prefer to listen to someone else’s voice (idea). After I gave my personal experiences that make people understand very well.”

“Sometimes I would like to answer when the professor ask I try to provide the answer. I feel I want to try after I saw other speak up.”

RESULTS ON SELF-REFLECTION:

“This class helped me improve my speaking skills by the small group activities and help me build new confidence in me.”

“I don’t have much confidence to speak in class because when I’m in elementary school I tried to answer my teacher’s question but ended up by being laughed and becoming a joke. My friends said it’s a dumb answer. That’s why I have less confidence in class.”

“I think I am a passive learner because I don’t really like to speak out much. Back I was in school in my country, I don’t have power and freedom to think. When I have a question, I have to active myself to understand it.”

“In my other class, I don’t understand what the professor is teaching. When I return home, I have to review everything by myself. I never participate in this class because he only speaks.”

“I have recently become an active reader and speaker after taking English 101. I made markings of what I am reading, highlight quotes which convey the reader’s ideology. I have become more confident about my reading and now want to speak more in class.”

OVERALL ANALYSIS:

Most of the inactive students feel that they do not have enough knowledge or confidence to participate in the class. As a result, these students fear humiliation, embarrassment, being misunderstood or making a mistake. They also feel intimidation from higher level students. They usually prefer to be in small groups.
The **active students** enjoy learning, the teacher, the class and topics. They are more confident, aggressive, fearless, prepared and as a result, eager to share their ideas. A few even like to show off their knowledge and English competency. Half wrote that it is their responsibility as students to ask questions and participate. 75% of the students show that when they gain familiarity within the classroom’s expectations and feel comfortable with their peers, they begin to bond and gain the confidence needed to offer their opinions openly without fear of ridicule.

All students agree that by participating in class, there is a lot to gain.

“You learn because this is a critical thinking class. Examples and answers from all the international students not only help to know more about the subject but I witness their culture, lifestyle and speaking.”