Ethnic Background and Classroom Participation: A Study in Adult Intermediate ESL Classes

Mi Jeong Song

Previous research suggests that classroom participation is an important predictor of second language proficiency. It is, then, important to know which variables influence classroom participation. In the present study, it is hypothesized that classroom participation is predicted by Language Class Risktaking, Sociability, Discomfort, Motivation, Attitude Toward Language Class, Sex, Ethnicity, and the Specific Language Class. Ethnicity is hypothesized to be one of the best predictors of students' voluntary participation in the ESL classroom. The results of a stepwise regression show that students' ethnic background is the most important factor in determining their voluntary participation in the ESL classroom. Compared with non-Asian students, Asian students voluntarily participated in the ESL classroom much less. Implications for ESL teachers are also discussed.

1. Background and Research Problem

Student participation in the classroom is a goal of most, if not all, teachers of English to speakers of other languages. This goal is desired for it is a widespread assumption that learners who engage more in interaction with others (inside or outside the classroom) will obtain more focused input and thereby develop more rapidly.

Several studies have investigated the influence of students' voluntary classroom participation on their language proficiency. First, Seliger (1977) provided empirical support for the claim that the use of the target language was an important factor in second language acquisition. In the study, he posited two types of adult second language learners characterized by how often they use or practice the target language: HIGs (high input generators) and LIGs (low input generators). Then, he hypothesized that students

who elicit more teacher input (HIGs) exhibited greater gains in L2 proficiency. Seliger identified HIGs and LIGs by the number of classroom interactions they used. His results showed that HIGs performed significantly better than LIGs on English proficiency final examinations. In addition, Seliger found that the HIGs tended to score higher than the LIGs on certain questions measuring the use of English outside the classroom.

Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, and Todesco (1978), in the Good Language Learner Project, observed a variety of learner behaviors, but only the measures of "hand-raising" and "student-teacher questioning" (number of times a student asked a question) were counted as explicit input-generating actions. They found that the measure for hand-raising correlated the highest of all the observed behaviors with the dependent measures of imitation and comprehension proficiency.

Ely (1986) also provided empirical evidence for the effect of classroom participation on second language acquisition. Among the 6 independent variables entered into a regression equation, he found that classroom participation had a significant effect on proficiency, accounting for 16 percent of the variance in oral correctness at the beginning level.

Others who have discussed the importance of learners using the target language include Rubin (1975), who claimed that the good language learner practiced and usually took "advantage of every opportunity to speak in class···" (1975: 47); Puhl (1975), who urged the ESL teacher to be humanistic in order to achieve a classroom which fosters "spontaneous talk" to lead "to communicative competence" (1975: 194); and Chastain (1975: 160), who studied affective variables for university students in beginning French, German, and Spanish courses and found that being more talkative or outgoing in class correlated significantly with higher grades.

These studies generally suggest that voluntary classroom participation is an important factor in second language acquisition. As the studies argue, if voluntary classroom participation influences second language acquisition, it is theoretically and pedagogically important to know variables that affect such voluntary classroom participation.

The present study was motivated by Ely's (1984) investigation of affective variables, classroom participation, and language proficiency. In the study, Ely built a causal model of second language proficiency which incorporated a number of variables related to classroom participation and profi-

ciency. He posited that affective variables influence a student's voluntary classroom participation, and such voluntary classroom participation in turn affects second language proficiency.

In order to determine those variables that are significant predictors of classroom participation, Ely entered 10 variables which he thought were related to classroom participation into the first regression equation: risktaking, discomfort, sociability, strength of motivation, aptitude, attitude toward language class, concern for grade, number of years of high school Spanish study, language background, and a specific language class in which a student enrolls. From the regression analysis, he found that risktaking and a specific language class were the most significant variables serving to predict classroom participation.

However, Ely's study was conducted in a foreign language setting. The subjects of his study were students enrolled in first-year Spanish courses at a university in northern California. Therefore, the variables Ely entered into the first regression equation were those particularly related to classroom participation of students who learn Spanish as a foreign language.

Unlike foreign language classrooms, ESL classrooms generally consist of students whose national backgrounds are widely divergent. Several ESL researchers have considered ethnic differences in students' voluntary participation in ESL classrooms.

Sato (1982), for example, investigated this question in a study of two university ESL classes. In the study, she was particularly concerned with the different turn-taking styles of Asian and non-Asian students. One variable studied was the number of self-selected turns taken by the groups, that is, student-initiated turns that were not dependent on prior solicits. Sato presumed that Asian students might differ in classroom participation, although no directional or qualitative hypotheses were made. She found that the Asians as a group (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean), although greater in numbers than non-Asians (Latin Americans, Europeans, and Middle Easterners), took significantly fewer self- selected turns than non-Asians (34% vs. 66%, respectively, of the total turns) with the Asians adhering more strictly to a pattern of bidding for turns in class, instead of just speaking out. In other words, prior to entering to discussion, the Asian students indicated their desire to speak by signaling the teacher somehow. Thus, in these classes, Asians' expectations for appropriate turn-taking

procedures may be denying them opportunities for manipulating input. Bannai (1981) warned ESL teachers against allowing their Asian students to be silent, since this would deprive the students of the opportunity to develop oral language skills. Pica *et al.* (1987) also expressed concern about Asian students whose styles of classroom participation make them reluctant to question their teacher, to speak out voluntarily, or to respond to general classroom solicitations.

Although these researchers proclaimed that ethnic or cultural difference is related to students' voluntary participation in the ESL classroom, no researchers have studied the influence of ethnic difference on voluntary participation in ESL classrooms when entered into a regression equation with other variables. The purpose of this study is to determine if students' culture or ethnicity significantly predicts voluntary participation in ESL classrooms.

Assuming that class participation affects learning English in ESL classrooms in a positive manner, then, if this study finds that ethnicity is a significant predictor of students' voluntary participation, it would provide valuable information for ESL instructors whose classes contain students of varying nationalities. Thus, it would be practically important to know whether ethnicity is a statistically significant variable that predicts students' voluntary classroom participation.

In this present study, it is hypothesized that students' voluntary participation in the ESL classroom is influenced by the following variables: 'language class risktaking', 'language class discomfort', 'language class sociability', 'attitude toward the language class', 'strength of motivation', 'sex', 'ethnic difference (Asians vs. Non-Asians)', and 'a specific language class'. The last variable, 'specific language class' was included because certain aspects of the individual language classes may influence the degree of classroom participation.

2. Method

2.1. Setting of the Study

The subjects were students enrolled in low intermediate and advanced intermediate speaking classes of the Intensive English Language Institute at

the University at Buffalo. The study involved 4 speaking classes: two low intermediate speaking classes (4A and 4B) and two advanced intermediate speaking classes (5A and 5C). The students were told only that the study concerned various aspects of language learning. Similarly, the three teachers were not advised of the specific objectives of the research; they were aware, however, that it was the students, rather than the teachers, who were the focus of the study. The data were collected during the fall semester of the 1992 academic year.

2. 2. Overview of Scale Operationalization

The first five predictor variables were measured with paper and pencil questionnaires or scales, and there were several steps in the development of these scales: the Language Class Risktaking, Language Class Sociability, Language Class Discomfort, Attitude toward Language Class, and Strength of Motivation. Despite the attractiveness of employing the instruments used in Ely's (1985) study, an examination of the scales led to the conclusion that a number of the items were not wholly applicable to the target population of this study since Ely's study was conducted in a setting where college students learned Spanish as their foreign language. It was therefore decided to develop an instrument designed for the specific learning situation. This decision was consistent with Gardner and Smythe's (1981: 512) caution that an affective instrument should give "considerable attention… toward identifying items which will be applicable to a particular population of interest." Based on these rationales, during the summer session I of 1992, 6 students (3 Asians and 3 non-Asians) enrolled in a low intermediate speaking class (4A) and 6 students (3 Asians and 3 non-Asians) enrolled in an advanced intermediate speaking class (5B) were interviewed in order to generate items for each scale that are of high validity for the research setting of the study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. From the analysis of interview data, representative questionnaire items for each scale were written. Some of the items for each scale were similar to those used in Ely's (1985) study.

A pilot questionnaire was then constructed from these items, and administered to 54 students enrolled in the Summer session I 1992 speaking classes (4A, 4B, 5A, and 5B). Out of 54 students, 47 students returned the

questionnaires. Item analysis of the pilot questionnaire results was carried out in order to select the most appropriate items for the final questionnaire, resulting in 36 of the 47 items being selected.

The items of each scale were interspersed with those of the other scale. Each item was followed by a six-point Likert response scale, with the alternatives labeled: "strongly disagree," "moderately disagree," "slightly disagree," "slightly agree," "moderately agree," "strongly agree." The following were the instruments used in the study: (items for all scales are presented in Appendix A).

Language Class Risktaking. This scale measures a student's willingness to take risks in using the target language in the class. The number of items for this scale is 9.

Language Class Discomfort. This scale measures the degree of anxiety, self-consciousness, or embarrassment felt when speaking the L2 in the classroom. There are 9 items in the scale.

Language Class Sociability. This scale measures a student's willingness to interact with others in the L2 class by means of the L2. This scale consists of 5 items.

Attitude toward the Language Class. Four items measure a student's interest in and enjoyment of the class.

Strength of Motivation. Seven items measure a student's desire to learn the L2.

The final questionnaire was administered to 52 students enrolled in 4 speaking classes (4A, 4B, 5A, and 5C) in the Fall term, 1992. Of 52 students, 42 students returned the questionnaire.

2. 3. Operationalization of Classroom Participation

In the present investigation, the construct of Classroom Participation was measured by recording every occasion when a student asked or answered a question or provided information in English without being called on by the instructor to do so. In the study, only students' voluntary participation in activities directly led by the classroom instructor was observed. Students' voluntary participation in group activities was not a concern of the study.

The classroom observers were one female native speaker of English and one female native speaker of Chinese whose English proficiency is almost

native-like. The observers were blind to the hypotheses of the study and were told only that the research was designed to investigate various aspects of language learning. Each observer was responsible for two of four classes. Each class was observed six times: the data from the first observation were not used and only data from the last five observations (totaling 250 minutes) were used in the data analysis.

The observers used an observation coding sheet (Appendix B) on which they noted the identity of each new speaker (using the first letter of the student's name) and the first word or two each speaker uttered. During two training sessions, the use of the coding sheet was explained in detail and the observers received 150 minutes of practice in two different classrooms.

To assess the inter-observer reliability, both individuals observed the same classes twice. Then, the percentage of agreement was computed: observer A had noted (and agreed with the identification of the speaker of) 92 percent of the utterances noted by observer B; observer B had done the same for 90 percent of the utterances noted by observer A. This is probably a conservative estimate of the overall reliability of this process; the coders commented that the interaction had been very fast-paced during the classes.

3. Results and Discussions

In this study, it was hypothesized that there were three primary sources of variation in Classroom Participation: Strength of Motivation to learn English, Language Class Personality (Language Class Discomfort, Language Class Risktaking, and Language Class Sociability), and Attitude toward the Language Class. Also suggested as possible predictors of Classroom Participation were Sex and Ethnicity (Asian vs. non-Asian). In addition, it seemed likely that certain aspects of individual classes might influence the degree of Classroom Participation.

Classroom Participation was regressed on these 8 factors using a multiple regression. The result of the regression analysis appears in Table 1.

Variables were regressed in two blocks: in the first block, the five independent variables were: Motivation, Language Class Discomfort, Language Class Risktaking, Language Class Sociability, and Attitude toward the Lan-

Table 1. Regression Analysis of Classroom Participation on eight variables

R	R2	Adjusted R2	F	P
.83	.69	.59	6.79	< .001

guage Class. In the second block were dummy Ethnicity and Sex variables, followed by three dummy variables representing contrasts for the four classes. The regression model accounted for 59% of the total variance in classroom participation. However, significance tests of the beta weights indicated that only four variables were making a unique contributions to the prediction of classroom participation variance. These were ethnicity, risktaking, class 1, and class 2.

The data were then analyzed using stepwise regression in order to determine the variables that have the greatest influence on classroom participation. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the first variable entered into the regression model was Ethnicity (Asian vs. non-Asian). This variable alone accounted for as much as 42% of the total variance in students' voluntary participation in the ESL classroom. The next two variables entered were Class 5A and Class 4B. As demonstrated in Table 2, these three variables accounted for 56% of the total variability. The optimal regression model chose these three variables as the best predictors of the Classroom Participation in the ESL classroom. Other variables that had been hypothesized as the predictors of Classroom Participation, were not significant predictors of Classroom Participation. The correlation matrix is shown in Appendix B.

From these results, it was found that Asian students (Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, Burmese, and Indonesian) participated significantly less than

Table 2. Stepwise Regression Analysis of Classroom Participation

Step	Variables	R	R2	Adjusted R2	Adjusted R2 change	F
1	Ethnicity	.66	.44	.42	.42	31.12
2	Class 1	.72	.52	.49	.07	21.03
3	Class 2	.78	.60	.56	.07	19.07

Note. For all F ratios, p < .01

those students coming from other regions such as Latin America, Europe, Middle East, etc. In other words, in 4 ESL classroom settings, non-Asian students voluntarily asked or answered a question or provided information in English much more often than Asian students. It was also found that there was a significant effect for a specific language class. This significant class effect may be attributed to teaching styles of the three different teachers. The results also suggested that students' motivation to learn English, personality (risktaking, discomfort, sociability), attitude toward language class, and sex were unrelated to their voluntary participation in the ESL classroom. To summarize, the present study revealed that a student's ethnic background and a specific language class in which the student is enrolled were the most crucial and critical factors in determining the degree of his/her voluntary participation in the ESL classroom. Other variables were not found to have an influence on classroom participation.

4. Conclusions

The present study explored the variables hypothesized to be the predictors of students' voluntary participation in the ESL classroom. The investigated variables were: Motivation to learn English, Personality (Risktaking, Discomfort, and Sociability), Attitude toward language class, Sex, Ethnicity, and a Specific language class. In the study, it was hypothesized that a student's ethnic background would be a significant predictor which determines the degree of his voluntary participation in the ESL classroom. The result of the study showed that whether or not a student was a Asian or a non-Asian was the most important factor in determining the student's degree of voluntary participation in the ESL class. In other words, Asian students, in general, participated much less than non-Asian students in the ESL classroom. This result confirmed to the hypothesis of the study. The results of the study also suggested that a specific language class was a significant predictor of classroom participation.

The findings of the present study have important implications for ESL teachers, particularly for ESL teachers working in language institutes such as IELI where Asian students constitute a majority. It appears necessary for ESL teachers to recognize the existence of ethnic difference in students' voluntary classroom participation and to encourage voluntary classroom

participation of "quiet" Asian students. It may not be enough, however, to simply adjure Asian students to participate more; teachers' effort and skill in developing activities which promote voluntary participation of Asian students appears to be important. Many previous studies showed that voluntary classroom participation was an important factor in improving second/foreign language skills, especially speaking skill. Therefore, as language professionals, we have an obligation to encourage voluntary participation of "quiet" Asian students who consist of a majority in number in the ESL classroom.

The population of students addressed in this study was that of adult ESL students attending an English language institute, IELI at the University at Buffalo. Further research is necessary to assess the applicability of the findings to other types of second language students. Varying the level of students from university to high school and junior high school may also lead to different results. In secondary school settings, for instance, peer approval may be of greater importance, producing levels of language Class Discomfort, Risktaking and Sociability that differ from those among university-level adult ESL students.

References

Bannai, R. (1981) 'Socio-Cultural Influences on the Communication Development of Asian ESL Students,' in *On TESOL*, '80, Building Bridges: Research and Practice in Teaching English as a Second Language, J. Fisher, M. Clarke, and J. Schachter, eds., Washington, D. C.: TESOL.

Chastain, K. (1975) 'Affective and Ability Factors in Second Language Acquisition,' *Language Learning* 25, 153-161

Chaudron, C. (1988) *Second Language Classrooms, Research on Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge University Press.

Ely, C. (1986) 'An Analysis of Discomfort, Risk-Taking, Sociability and Motivation in the Second Language Classroom,' *Language Learning* 36, 1-25.

Fogler, R. and Ganapathy, S. (1982) *Financial Econometrics*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs.

Gardner, R. C., and Smythe, P. C. (1981) 'On the Development of the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery,' *The Canadian Modern Language Review*,

37, 510-525.

Gliksman, L., R. C. Gardner, and P. C. Smythe. (1979) 'An Investigation of the Test-Retest Reliability of the Subscales of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT),' *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 35, 204-210.

Naiman, N., M. Frohlich, H. Stern, and A. Todesco. (1978) 'The Good Language Teacher,' *Research in Education Series No.* 7, Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Puhl, C. A. (1975) 'A Practical Humanism for Developing Communicative Competence in the ESL Learner,' in *On TESOL '75*, Burt and Dulay, eds., Washington, D. C.: TESOL.

Rubin, J. (1975) 'What the "Good Language Learner" Can Teach Us,' *TESOL Quarterly* 9, 42-51.

Sato, C. (1982) 'Ethnic Styles in Classroom Discourse,' in M. Hines and W. Rutherford, eds., *On TESOL '81*, Washington, D. C.: TESOL.

Seliger, H. W. (1977) 'Does Practice Make Perfect?: A Study of Interaction Patterns and L2 Competence,' *Language Learning* 27, 263-278.

Language Research Institute
Seoul National University
Seoul, 151-742
Korea

Appendix A

I. Language Class Risktaking

1. I like to try out difficult sentences in class.
2. In class, I prefer to say a sentence to myself before I speak it.
3. It's sometimes hard for me to get into a discussion when I have something to say.
4. I like to try out a newly-learned word in class.
5. I say every thing that I want to say in class without any hesitation.
6. I sometimes translate what I want to say into my native language before I say it in English.
7. In class, I sometimes rehearse what I want to say while other students are discussing a certain topic.
8. I don't want to use very complicated words or sentences in class because I don't want to make any mistake.
9. I prefer to follow basic sentence models rather than risk misusing the language.

II. Language Class Discomfort

1. I feel stupid when I think I do not speak English well in class.
2. At times, I feel somewhat embarrassed in class when I am trying to say something.
3. If I do not speak a good English, some classmates will make a fool out of me.
4. I sometimes feel awkward speaking English in class.
5. I feel stupid when I make mistakes in speaking English.
6. I usually feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.
7. At times, I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.
8. Based on my class experience so far, I think that one barrier to my use of English is that I do not feel comfortable when speaking.
9. I never feel embarrassed when speaking in language class.

III. Language Class Motivation

1. Outside of class, I usually think about what I am learning in class.
2. I usually try to relate what I am learning in class to real situations.
3. I think that I try very hard to learn English.
4. If possible, I would like to take more English classes.
5. I have a great desire to learn a lot of English.
6. I really feel that learning English is valuable to me.
7. I enjoy hard work.
8. I plan to learn as much English as possible.
9. I actively think about what I've learned in my English classes.

IV. Attitude Toward Language Class

1. I find most of my English classes to be very boring.
2. In general, I am interested in what we do in English classes.
3. I really enjoy English classes.
4. I think that attending English classes is a waste of time.

V. Language Class Sociability

1. I think learning English in a group is more fun than if I had my own tutor.
2. I enjoy talking with the teacher and other students in class.
3. I think that it's important to have a strong group spirit in the language classroom.
4. I like to have more class activities where the students use English to get to know each other better.
5. I enjoy interacting with other students in class.