

Pedagogical Insights

Silent responses: Building international student confidence to participate in taught sessions at the graduate level

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<https://doi.org/eiki/10.59652/jetm.v2i3.263>

Abstract: Over the last few decades, the number of tertiary students studying abroad has grown significantly. This has resulted in instructors teaching an increasingly diverse student body (both culturally and linguistically), particularly at the graduate level. This article focuses its attention on international students whose classroom presence is described by some as being very quiet, with a reluctance to speak up within the learning environment. To positively address this, a suite of original practical strategies is presented for graduate instructors to use to initially build international student confidence to participate during taught sessions. By embracing the notion of silent responses to questions, graduate instructors can be sensitive to select factors which influence international students' reluctance in participating in classroom activities, supporting their emerging confidence and learning experience at the start of their graduate programme.

Keywords: silent responses, international students, graduate level, classroom activities, learning environment

1. Introduction

'Over the past half century, a growing number of international students have enrolled at colleges and universities' (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013, p.85). Ten years on and media headlines such as *International student enrolment rise is fastest in 40 years* (Greenfield, 2023) reinforce the fact that students from countries such as China, India and South Korea are continuing to choose to go abroad to pursue their higher education (Holliman et al., 2024). The benefits of international students to both the host country and the academic institution are well-rehearsed (i.e., culturally and financially), as is a recognition of the personal and professional challenges for those studying abroad (i.e., the use of critical thinking skills and perceived discrimination; see Milian et al., 2015).

The focus of this article centres on the dearth of classroom participation instructors are likely to encounter when teaching international students at the start of their graduate programme. Reinforced by anecdotal evidence and the thinking of Zhu and O'Sullivan (2022), research by Bai and Wang (2022) report on 'in-class silence' (p.72) from international students during planned interactions with both instructors and their peers, along with 'limited participation in class discussion and rarely rais[ing] questions' (p.72)ⁱ. Zhou et al. (2021) suggest that their silence is attributed to various factors; these include 'differing education context and pedagogy' (p.81) between the host country and the country of origin, 'class environment, their personal work experience, part-time job commitments, personal interest, and emotional state' (p.81). Given that English is the dominating language of instruction in many colleges and universities across the globe, a significant barrier to international students' participation in the graduate classroom relates to the language barrier and their language abilities (Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabdic, 2017).

In an effort to positively address this barrier, I believe that when instructors initially work with international students at the start of their graduate programme, they should promote *silent responses* to questions to gently stimulate student participation during taught sessions. This can effectively establish a psychologically safe learning environment for the international student body, alleviating communication anxiety, and initiating purposeful class participation (Hsu & Huang, 2017) as students transition into their new programme.

Received: July 6, 2024

Accepted: July 25, 2024

Published: July 29, 2024



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2. Making *silent responses* to questions in the graduate level classroom

The inspiration for silent responses was fuelled by the work of Cooper (1998) who recognised the power of non-verbal communication in improving students' 'cognitive ability and learning efficiency' (p.57, quoted in Li and Yang, 2020, p.94). I define silent responses as replies to a question which do not rely on/use the spoken word. The strategies offered in Table 1 serve as a selection of novel strategies that are drawn from my own extensive professional practice when working with international students.

Table 1. Practical strategies to encourage *silent responses* from international students to questions asked during taught sessions at the graduate level.

Strategy	Details
Numbered answer	Display a question with three possible answers (numbered), one of which is correct. Invite students to place a hand on their opposite shoulder, revealing a certain number of fingers to indicate their answer (model appropriate ways to show one and two fingers to avoid it being interpreted as an obscene gesture by some cultures).
'Blind' raised arm	Present students with a question that has an either/or answer. Encourage students to close their eyes and raise one of their arms, ensuring they are clear which arm represents which answer. Ensure that students lower their arms before collectively opening their eyes.
Answers on a card	Provide each student with a set of cue/note cards on which are written the answers to key questions that will be asked during the taught session. Ask students to find and hold up the relevant answer (at least from their perspective) at select times during the taught session.
Head movements	Get students to respond to a true or false question with 'silent nods as affirmative answers' (De Stefani, 2021, p.353) or a shake of the head for negative responses.
Sign language	Model to students how to offer a yes/no response to a question using, as an example, American Sign Language: 'To say yes, take a hand and make it into a fist and bob it back and forth, resembling a head nodding. To say no, take your first two fingers and tap them with your thumb, resembling a mouth saying no' (Birley, 2020).
Sticky note answers	Give each student a set of three sticky notes on which are written the individual letters 'A', 'B' and 'C' (note: students could write these letters on themselves). Ask students to offer an answer to a question by cupping the corresponding letter in their hand so their response can only be seen by the graduate instructor (or a peer) when shown.
Facial expressions	Invite students to use facial expressions to indicate their level of agreement with given answers to an oral question, e.g., a smile (agree), a frown (disagree), or a straight-lined mouth (neutral).
Standing vote	'...ask students to 'ballot with their bodies', physically standing up if they are in agreement with a displayed statement or research claim' (Brownhill, 2023, p.2) or remaining seated if they do not concur with it.

3. Discussion

By way of a concise discussion, it is my intention to acknowledge two important points for consideration, the first of which relates to the physical distribution of practical resources necessary to implement select silent response activities, e.g., cue cards/sticky notes (see Table



1). I personally advocate putting the necessary resource on a table by the classroom door, inviting students to pick up said resource via a paper sign as they enter the learning space; alternatively, the resources could be put inside opaque food bags, recyclable boxes, and/or clean plastic trays/tubs which are then physically passed around the students as the introduction to the taught session is made. The second consideration is a gentle reminder that the strategies offered in Table 1 are specifically advocated for graduate instructor use during the first few weeks of an academic programme as international students settle in to their studies. Instructors are encouraged to gradually seek oral responses to questions from international students as the semester/term progresses, this being purposeful in helping to raise their oral English proficiency and self-confidence through the use of a range of questioning techniques (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020), and the deployment of activities such as *Turn and Talk* (Stewart & Swanson, 2019) and Cooper, Schinske and Tanner's (2021) four alternatives to *Think-Pair-Share*.

4. Conclusions

This article serves as a small yet significant attempt to encourage participation from international students in taught sessions at the start of their graduate programme when studying abroadⁱⁱ. By being sensitive and responsive to select factors which can affect student engagement in the classroom, graduate instructors are invited to initially embrace silent responses to questions as part of their pedagogical arsenal to 'wak[e] up' passive learners (Ping, 2010, p.208). This original approach can then be gradually replaced with one which actively seeks oral responses to questions to aid the developing competencies of students, this being generously promoted through instructor patience, encouragement, and scaffolding (where appropriate).

Endnotes:

ⁱ In recognition of the stigmatisation of international students in Western higher education (see, for example, Moosavi, 2022), I wish to clarify that this article has not been written to 'unwittingly stereotype ethnic minorities' (p.496), but instead strives to positively respond to those students who seek practices and 'encouragement from educators to help them share their viewpoints in the classroom' (see Heng, 2017, quoted in Deuchar, 2022, p.507).

ⁱⁱ I personally advocate the use of these strategies as good practice for all students, irrespective of their international background and level of study, particularly those students who may be introverted, lack self-confidence, have low self-esteem, or suffer from high anxiety.

Supplementary Materials & Data Availability Statement: No supplementary materials and no empirical data are connected to this piece of work given the nature of the article.

Author Contributions: This is a single-authored article - no other authors have contributed to its writing.

Funding: No funding was sought in the development of this article.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to sincerely thank Miguel García López for commenting on an earlier draft of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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