AUTOMATICALLY MUTED: NAVIGATING SPEAKING CHALLENGES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN A COLLECTIVIST CULTURE

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Abstrak

Para peneliti telah menemukan cara-cara di mana budaya kolektivis mempengaruhi perilaku siswa EFL di kelas, termasuk bagaimana mereka berperilaku dalam kelompok dan menahan diri untuk tidak berbicara. Gaya komunikasi kolektivis cenderung mengutamakan hubungan kelompok yang harmonis, menghindari konflik, dan komunikasi tidak langsung. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya telah memberikan bukti pengaruh budaya di kelas, masih sedikit informasi tentang bagaimana budaya kolektivis menyebabkan mahasiswa untuk tetap diam dalam partisipasi kelas. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memperdalam penemuan tantangan berbicara yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa dalam budaya kolektivis. Melalui metode penelitian kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis pengalaman mahasiswa di Indonesia sebagai negara kolektivis, dan menyoroti faktor-faktor budaya yang berkontribusi terhadap keengganan mereka untuk berbicara di kelas. Studi ini menemukan bahwa budaya kolektivis mempengaruhi kesediaan mahasiswa untuk berbicara di kelas, menyiratkan bagaimana mereka harus diam ketika yang lain juga diam.

Kata kunci: Kolektivisme, Kolektivis, Budaya, Siswa EFL, Keterampilan Berbicara

Abstract

Scholars have uncovered the ways in which collectivist culture influences EFL students' classroom behavior, including how they behave in groups and refrain from speaking. Collectivist communication styles tend to favor harmonious group relations, avoid conflict, and indirect communication. Although previous studies have provided evidence of cultural influence in class, there is still little information on how collectivist culture caused university students to remain silent in classroom participation. Therefore, this study aims to deepen the discovery of the speaking challenges faced by university students in a collectivist culture. Through qualitative research methods, this study analyzes the experiences of university students in Indonesia as a collectivist country, and highlights the cultural factors that contribute to their reluctance to speak up in class. The study found that collectivist culture influences students' willingness to speak up in class, implying how they should be silent when the others are also silent.

Keyword: *Collectivism, Collectivist, Culture, EFL Students, Speaking Skill*

Introduction

Culture is a complex word that might imply a deeper meaning in each of its definitions. Eagleton (2016) defines culture through four major senses, which include the artistic and intellectual work, the spiritual and intellectual development, the values, beliefs, and symbolism that people live in, and even 'a whole way of life' (p.1). Hofstede et al. (2010) defined culture as "patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout the person's lifetime" (p.4). Culture is seen as a "collective programming" that dictates one's mind (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.6), which mostly becomes apparent in how they think and behave. Meanwhile, Laland (2017) defined culture as the identity and features that distinct humans with others species, and further added by Eagleton (2016) as the identity to see one's life as distinctive from the other in which states how that person is a member of a particular group. In other words, culture is a representation of a person's or a group's identity, and is seen as something that differentiates people, rather than the similarity among them.

Identity is a common and natural feature of a person, in which it is carried and expressed through their behavior. In the classroom context, where many different individuals stay in one room, a classroom can have a rich concentration of one culture and a rich diversity of cultures. The large presence of culture in a classroom, without a doubt, indicates a cultural interference in the learning process (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Nurmaisyah (2020), in their study, observed this cultural interference in the classroom and found that culture has significantly shaped the students' way of thinking, speaking, and behaving. This indicates that culture as an identity is carried out by students and expressed as they learn in a classroom. One of the ways culture as both personal and social identity influences students behavior can be seen through students' participation in class (Frambach, 2014; Toyama, 2022), in this case, orally through speaking.

In a classroom, as the learning process occurs, speaking will naturally happen as the medium in which messages are delivered orally through words. A teacher will inevitably speak and deliver knowledge, however speaking for the students can be an option, in which if taken as a yes, it will provide for advantages in learning. Speaking, or can be called oracy, in a classroom has long been known to be beneficial to help students'

learning process (Millard, 2018; Hill, 2021). According to Gorad, et al. (2015) as cited in Millard (2018), an increase in classroom's oracy has a wide range of positive academic, personal, and social outcomes. Oracy can be realized by students through speaking up. Cambridge Dictionary (2023) defines speaking up as a way one expresses their thoughts or opinion. In other words, to speak up in class means to actively participate orally in the learning process. Although it is encouraged for students to speak up in class, many studies have found speaking up to be challenging for some students (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Li & Jia, 2006; Frambach, 2014; Banks, 2016).

Correlating struggles in speaking up with culture, there have been assumptions that culture has a significant role in students' willingness to speak up. Culture is said as one of the causes of students' passive participation in class (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). In addition, Frambach (2014) did research to examine how students' cultural backgrounds are expressed in class participation and shape students' discussion behaviors. The research was done in different regions with different cultural backgrounds, which are Middle East (Collectivist), East Asia (Collectivist), and Western Europe (Individualist). The result shows that cultural differences discourage students from speaking up, arguing with others in discussion, and asking questions—especially those in non-Western schools.

The previous findings show how the presence of culture in a classroom seems to be influential. To further analyze this cultural interference phenomenon in a classroom, we focus on one of Hofstede's (2010) cultural dimensions, Individualism versus Collectivism. The individualist and collectivist cultural values wielded by the environment and the individuals will inevitably be shown, for culture is one's identity (Eagleton, 2010), and it is represented through one's actions, feelings, and behavior, implying the presence of culture. In a classroom with strong individualist cultural values, students tend to be encouraged to speak up. They're taught to view confrontations and open discussion for conflicts as advantageous for their learning process (Hofstede, et al., 2010). Meanwhile, students with collectivist culture are taught to stay away from conflicts. They're often reported to be hesitant to speak and labeled as "passive knowledge absorber" (Liu & Littlewood,

1997; Li & Jia, 2006, p.192), labeling them as the quiet ones in the classroom. Accordingly, it can be seen how the two different cultures influence its wielder in behaving in the classroom, creating room for further investigation.

In this research, we analyze how culture influences students' willingness to speak up in class, especially university students in EFL context. We aim to seek and examine deeper into students' struggles in speaking up, especially being in a collectivist culture. This study aims to answer the research question of: "How does collectivism influence university students' willingness to speak up in a classroom?". Although previous studies have provided evidence of cultural influence in class, there's still little information on how collectivist culture caused university students to remain silent in classroom participation. Therefore, this study aims to deepen the discovery of the speaking challenges faced by university students in a collectivist culture.

Method

This study was conducted at a state university in Indonesia, focusing on the English Education Department program. The university is located in the east side of Indonesia, precisely in a city named Tasikmalaya, known as one of the best universities in East Priangan. The setting was chosen due to the richness of collectivist culture within the area. Indonesia is well-known for its collectivist culture, for Indonesian people tend to "have a high value of the group" (Mangundjaya, 2013, p.61). Moreover, Tasikmalaya is a city with rich Sundanese elements within its people. Sundanese culture and Sundanese people are regarded as collectivist and are said to be interdependent (Mangundjaya, 2013; Ninin, 2015). The interdependency connects them with their society, whereas one-self might change according to the specific social context that it interacts with. Therefore, the researchers see the setting as appropriate, for it provides richness in collectivist culture.

The participants of the research were six university students of the English Education Department of Universitas Siliwangi. The participants were purposefully selected and were chosen due to their familiarity with intercultural education. The researchers decided to use only 6 students because of the limited time of the research. The six participants were interviewed individually and comprehensively. All participants were informed about the research and have agreed to voluntarily participate.

A semi-structured interview was used for the data collection due to its flexibility in gaining information from the interviewees. A semi-structured interview is a type of interview that allows for deeper exploration on the topic (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Although the interview will still follow a pre-planned guide and protocol, it creates space for more questions to arise as the conversation occurs (Magaldi & Berler, 2020), seeking not only the answer of the question, but also why the answer is presented. Additionally, the semi-structured interview is conducted in a conversation-like manner, providing comfort for the participants, for comfort will create a sense of safety to share information (Hennink et al., 2020). Through this method, the researchers expect to gain more data and information by comprehensively and qualitatively interviewing the participants regarding the topic. The interview was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. The data was then analyzed and connected to previous study findings and a review of the literature.

The semi-structured interview focused on the participants' experience regarding their struggles and willingness to speak up in class, especially being in an environment with rich collectivism. The data was taken by recording and noting the interviewees' answers. Each interviews took 20-30 minutes, consisting of two parts of focus such as followed (1) Questions that focus to test participants' prior-knowledge of culture, including individualism and collectivism. (2) Questions that seek to find out what may be the struggles for the participants to speak up in class and their willingness to speak up in class.

Below is a table of the data the researchers gain from the interview.

Table. 1
Interview Data

Participants	Date of Interview	Interview Length
KQR	17/05/2023	21.57
SA	17/05/2023	26.54
UACK	17/05/2023	20.18
ADM	18/05/2023	23.39
DRA	18/05/2023	23.52
SKN	18/05/2023	22.47

Research Method

Qualitative method was used in this study to uncover how culture, in this case collectivist culture, can influence students' willingness to speak up in class. Hennink et al. (2020) elaborates how qualitative research allows in-depth analysis of a

phenomenon through people's perspectives and experiences, as well as observing the influence of their natural setting, by applying a set of in-depth analysis research methods such as interviews. Additionally, a qualitative method can be useful in observing areas where variables are not yet defined (Burney et al., 2024), acting as an analysis tool for researchers and allowing space for deep interpretation of the participants' data. Therefore, to reach the research objectives, the researchers see the qualitative method as the most appropriate method.

Findings and Discussion

Upon conducting interviews to collect data regarding what causes university students' struggles to speak up in a collectivist culture, the researchers found several intriguing findings that can be categorized into four main topics.

Afraid of Being Wrong

Fear has been known as one of the main factors of speaking. When the participants were asked about what may cause them to refrain from speaking, all participants mentioned fear or being wrong.

"I don't really participate in class because I just want to listen more, and often I feel shy and afraid that I'd say something wrong, especially when I answer a question from the lecturer."

Often I choose to remain silent even if I feel like I know the answer; Sometimes I just keep thinking until the time runs out because I'm not confident with my answer and I'm scared that I'm wrong.

When there are discussion activities in class, I prefer to listen to other people's opinions first. I feel embarrassed when expressing my opinion and most importantly I am afraid that my opinion will be wrong because in my opinion my knowledge is still lacking, so to speak up in class I like to hesitate because I am not sure that my answer is correct. I will usually remain silent for fear that I will be wrong in the argument. The fear arose because I felt that my knowledge was lacking.

From the participants' statements, fear of being wrong has an impactful influence in their decision to speak up in class. The main reasons for this fear as seen in the participants' response is affective factors (fear, anxiety) and lack of topical knowledge. This finding can be supported by Djahimo (2018) where they found that students' topical knowledge and affective factors are the two most influential factors in speaking. The result of the research could be seen in the chart below:

■ Feedback ■ Performance Condition ■ Listening Ability
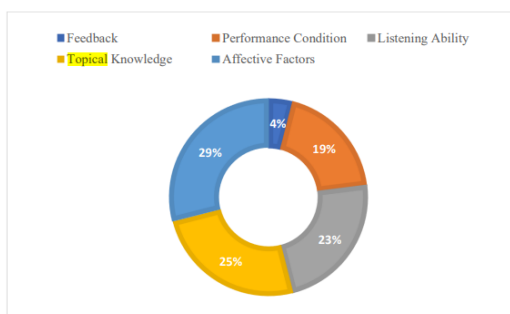■ Topical Knowledge ■ Affective Factors

Chart 1. Factors Affecting Students' Performance in Speaking (Djahimo,2018)

However what the researchers would like to highlight is where this fear is oriented. The participants were asked why they fear being wrong, and the answers revealed that they're afraid of others' judgment when they are seen as wrong.

> *I'm scared others' would comment on my opinion. For example, one time I did speak up in class, and I could see their eyes staring at me. I know they're secretly judging my opinion.*
> *The reason I didn't actively participate in class discussion activities was because I felt a lack of confidence, I was afraid and felt that my questions were worthless. I reasoned like that because I had experienced it and it was the main reason why I was not active in class discussions.*

The phenomenon where individuals truly consider others and their environment's view on them shows the characteristics of collectivism, particularly interdependency. This interdependency caused the individuals to see themselves as the social context that they're in, including the social relationship they have, meaning that they set their social relationship as the compass for their behavior, thoughts,

feelings, and actions (Ninin, 2015). In other words, collectivist individuals view others and their environment as a major factor that determines their behavior. This can be seen in the participants' responses of how important they perceive others' and their environment view of them. One participant even said that they do not speak for themselves.

> *I just feel like I cannot speak for myself. It's kind of hard for me. I don't feel like it's the right thing to do somehow.*

Aside from the collectivism in the individuals' identity, a collectivist environment also caused this fear of standing out, in this case through speaking up. As elaborated by Hofstede (2010), a collectivist classroom sees group harmony as supreme and not losing face is crucial. To reach these objectives, collectivist individuals in a collectivist environment would avoid conflicts at all cost, such as how they chose to not stand out, in this case not speaking up. Hofstede (2010) also explained how if there is a confrontation against the group, the group might regain their honor by "shaming" against "offenders" where "they will be set straight by their in-group members" (p.118). Based on this explanation, we understand that the participants' fear of being wrong when speaking up is caused by their fear of others' perception of them.

This fear does not exist suddenly but in a collectivist culture, the individuals are taught to not lose their face in front of the group (Hofstede, et al., 2010, p.118). All of these can be seen from the participants' statements above. The participants fear the judgment of others if they dare to speak up, whereas if they do speak up when others don't, that means they will stand out among the rest. They avoid conflict by not standing out, by being silent, and rather than representing themselves, they feel the obligation of representing the group or the people in the environment that they're in. This implies the significant influence of the collectivist environment into the individuals' collectivism. The collectivist characteristics from both the individuals and the environment are interlinked with one another, influencing the participants thoughts, actions, and behavior, where in this case become the reason for their fear of speaking up in a classroom.

Considering Others' Judgment and Feeling

"Fear of being judged by others" is one of the things that cause students to refrain from speaking up. This fear of judgment can greatly impact an individual's behavior and hinder their ability to fully express themselves. For Instance, when it comes to participating in class discussions, individuals often experience heightened anxiety and reluctance due to the fear of negative evaluations and criticisms from their peers or teacher. Participants mentioned their fear of others' judgment when speaking in class.

> *I want to give my own opinion, but I feel inferior and afraid of how people will react to me.*
> *Other people's opinions influence me, affect my way of thinking, and indirectly impact me in my actions.*

From some of the statements conveyed by the participants, the fear of other people's judgment of themselves is a factor that influences and impacts how they act in class, especially in speaking. This feeling of "being judged" can limit a person's ability to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, limit interacting with peers and asking questions, and other learning opportunities (Grieve, et al., 2021). Accordingly, the participants' claims show how they're limited from expressing themselves in the classroom due to their fear. A study by Leong and Ahmadi (2017: 36) further proves the phenomenon, where they found how students feel ashamed of other people who pay attention to them. The students' fear of other people's opinions shows the importance of group opinion for them.

Moreover, the participants' fear of judgment of the group might arise from the participants' self-consciousness and their attempt to avoid unwanted negative feelings. The findings of Henry et al. (2018) explain how younger adults tend to more likely experience strong negative self-conscious emotions, such as shame. This can be seen from the statement of the participant below, whereas they show strong self-consciousness as they're surrounded by people in the group.

> *What focuses on my fear of being wrong is the fear of other people thinking something bad about me, even though it's not true.*

From the participant's statement above, we can see how the participant has strong self-consciousness, causing them to fear others to perceive them negatively, although knowing that it's not true. This strong negative self-consciousness is more likely caused by fear of the consequences of one's actions, causing them to refrain from actions that might cause the feeling of shame (Henry et al., 2018), in this case the action that might cause such consequences is speaking up in class. In other words, young adults (i. e. university students) are more likely to be self-conscious, be aware of their surroundings, and will act accordingly to avoid conflict that might cause unwanted emotion such as shame. Therefore, the participants' high self-consciousness causes them to fear others' judgment of them on the actions they do, as well as perceiving the action of speaking up as something scary, for there's a chance they would make a mistake and such mistake will cause them the unwanted feeling of shame among the group.

In addition, the participants' consciousness of the groups' perception indicates the strong collectivism in their identity, and also become the reason for why they refrain from speaking up in class. This is because collectivist students prioritize the group's harmony (Hofstede, et al, 2010). When they're situated in a large group such as a classroom, they will be less likely to stand out, as Hofstede et al. (2010) explain how collectivist students "hesitate to speak up in large groups without a teacher's presence" (p.118). Due to this, the students might face difficulties in speaking up, refrain from speaking, and start the trend of being silent (Toyama, & Yamazaki, 2022). Such a classroom of strong collectivism from both the individuals and the environment will likely become a learning place where students are faithful to their collectivism identity, carefully observing the situation rather than actively engaging oneself in classroom participation.

Another thing that becomes the participants' concern in speaking up in class is how they might hurt others' feelings with their words when they chose to speak up in a discussion. Although classroom discussion is common and encouraged in individualist culture (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022), people in collectivist culture were taught to avoid confrontations and conflicts (Hofstede, et al., 2010), in this case, speaking up may cause conflicts. Below are the participants' answers that show their concern of hurting people's feelings in classroom activities.

> *If I have a different opinion with other people, I prefer not to express it. I'm the type of person who when I'm going to argue I think in advance whether my argument will hurt him or not. if it has the potential to hurt him, I prefer to remain silent because I am afraid that I will argue, I am afraid that my argument will offend that person.*

From these explanations, we can see that both considerations are oriented to others rather than to the participants themselves. Meaning that what concerns them are others' views and how it may affect them. The participants view others as important, in this case, they are worried and aim to maintain the relationship they have with others. This indicates a collectivism aspect (Hofstede, et al., 2010), both in the environment and in the individual. This fear is then indirectly limiting them from taking action and speaking up.

Power Relation

Power is an individual's ability to wade through the actions, beliefs, and behaviors of others in social life. The power distance dimension refers to the extent to which a national culture expects and accepts an unequal distribution of power in a society (Hofstede, 1980). Power distances characterize the cultures of social systems and nations rather than individuals, and reflect the common cultural acceptance of the roles of social strata, especially in the context of work. However, it does not directly address cultural differences or individual differences in the nature of the concept of power.

Power distance in a collectivist culture is very influential in someone's behavior and expressing opinions, especially in learning activities in the classroom. In our research, the hierarchy in the collectivist culture system is very influential in their decision to speak up in class. This is evidenced by the statements of the respondents we interviewed indicated:

> *When I have a difference of opinion with the lecturer I prefer to be silent because I*

am aware of the difference in power between me and the lecturer. I'm afraid to express my disagreement with the lecturer because I'm afraid the lecturer will be hurt by my opinion and I'm afraid it will affect my l grade.

When I have disagreements with the lecturer I prefer to be silent because I am afraid of the lecturer. Because if there are students who want to refute their opinion, the lecturer instead scolds his students by saying that students don't know anything. The power difference between lecturers and students affects me in speaking up in class.

Lecturers have more power than students so I feel limited in speaking up, and I'm afraid to speak up because of the difference in power.

I once talked to the lecturer about grades, because I felt I should be given a higher grade. But the lecturer's answer was not to clarify why I got that grade, instead, the lecturer gave the impression that he didn't want to be criticized for his decision. Instead, the lecturer told me that my grade should be lower. Because of this, I finally prefer to be silent and not continue the conversation.

The difference in power between lecturers and students is very clear, students assume that the lecturer is always right and if there is disagreement with the lecturer the respondents prefer to remain silent rather than speak up. Student often feel anxious or afraid when communicating with lectures beacuse they view lectures as figures who are difficult to reach (Situmorang, 2019). The relationship between students indicated a difference in strength. The difference in

strength between fellow students is indicated by a sense of inferiority among students, aversion towards students who have high existence, and is also indicated by the fear that the student has little knowledge and when arguing with those students who has more knowledge, according to respondents, it is better to remain silent than to have to speak up. Regarding power difference between students, some respondents that we have interviewed indicated:

Actually, sometimes I also want to speak up when there is a discussion in class, but I first see who is arguing. If the person having the argument is someone who has more insight than me.

I realize that fellow students have differences in power. especially if it has something to do with students who have a high existence in the class. The difference in power makes me fear speaking up in class.

I also want to speak up but I'm the type of person who likes to just talk to myself. When I don't agree with other people I choose to be silent because I'm afraid of other people's views on me and also I'm afraid of hurting them. My fear also has something to do with having an opinion on certain groups in class who have power over me.

I'm aware that my classmates are more than capable of answering. Often I'm hesitant to speak up because I'm scared that I'm wrong and afraid there's someone more capable than me. I feel like I'm unworthy to talk against them.

Based on these findings it can be concluded that the reason students chose

to remain silent rather than speak up in class was due to differences in strength as indicated by the opinions of respondents who stated they were afraid to speak up because of low self-esteem among students, reluctance towards students who have high existence, and also indicated by fear that students have little knowledge and when arguing with students who have more knowledge.

Following the Group and Environment

Collectivism is tightly linked with groups, as it is the values that are taught to them. Collectivist individuals that are raised in a collectivist environment will learn to think of themselves as part of the "we" group where it's distinct from the "they" group in society (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.91). They're used to the concept of group which explains their tendency of being interdependent. As they grow with these values of groups, their group's judgment, decision, aims, and values are considered supreme to them (Hofstede et al., 2010). In other words, collectivist individuals will honor their group's identity, and uphold it as a label of their own. In the classroom context, this rule also applied both in a collectivist environment and with collectivist students, as further elaborated by the participants' answers when being asked

the reasons that caused them to refrain from speaking. The participants show that groups have a significant impact on their willingness to participate in class, in this case through speaking up.

> *One of the things that holds me from speaking is my friend group. For example, in a classroom there is a group that is lively and active, and there's also a group that's quiet. As for me, I am a part of the quiet group. Therefore when I wanted to speak up, I was held back by the fact that my group identity is "quiet". Besides, the people who often speak up in class are from groups that are active in participating, and they have more power. Back in junior high and senior high, I could still speak up to the teachers and my classmates. It's because the environment's character is similar to my character. But now in university, I tend to be more passive, since the environment itself is silent. Thus, I position myself to be in line with the environment that I'm in, despite my active character and me actually wanting to speak up more in class.*

The participants' answers show how their group's identity affects how they speak up. One participant explained that the quiet identity of their group can cause them to embody that identity and take it as their own. The participant's fear of being different from their group is rooted from collectivism tendency where they're taught to avoid confrontations against the group because it may cause them shame (Hofstede, et al., 2010). Other participants also show that their silent environment and peers tend to hold them back and

make them silent as well. The behavior of the people in the participants' learning environment builds the culture in that environment, for a culture is the humans' behavior and the human behavior is what makes a culture, as stated by Eagleton (2016) of how culture is the social existence itself. This links back to how culture influences how one acts and behaves, for it is a "collective programming" that dictates a person's mind (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.6). This culture is considered collectivist, for the collectivist attitude promotes group harmony and cohesion (Hofstede et al., 2010), which leads to individuals prioritizing collective agreement over individual expression. In educational settings, this can show as a hesitation to speak up in class in order to avoid breaking group unity or calling attention to oneself. Even when students have meaningful contributions to offer, they may choose to remain silent for fear of being regarded as questioning the group's norms.

Conclusion

Based on the results of data analysis, it can be concluded that culture does influence students' active participation in class, particularly in speaking up, as suggested by previous study (Banks, 2016; Frambach, 2014; Liu & Littlewood, 1997). In particular, the collectivist culture in the classroom that is analyzed is a major factor in student silence during class. The factors that characterize student collectivist culture include fear of being wrong, considering the judgments and feelings of others, differences in strength, and tending to follow a group or environment. The students' fear and silence in speaking are also influenced by the classroom environment, so they indirectly adjust to it which becomes the reason they become "automatically muted" in class when speaking up.Although the results of this analysis provide valuable insights, there are some limitations to this analysis. First, this study is limited to the number of samples only in one class or specific educational environment. Therefore, the generalizations of the findings apply only to the population of students in that class and may not reflect the experiences of students in different educational environments and cultures. Second, time and resource constraints were also a limiting factor in this study. This study was limited in time and resources which may have affected the number of participants that could be included in the analysis and the quality of the data collected.It is

important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and see it as a call for further, more extensive, and comprehensive research to broaden our understanding of the correlation between culture and student participation in educational contexts.

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