CULTURE AND CRITICAL THINKING IN CLASSROOM: NARRATIVES FROM UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

Syed Abdul Manan  
Department of English, Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering & Management Sciences, Quetta  
Pakistan  
Email: rm_manan@yahoo.com

Tariq Mehmood  
Department of Islamic Studies, Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering & Management Sciences, Quetta  
Pakistan  
Email: tmuzi@yahoo.com

Introduction

Approaches towards teaching and learning across the academia have taken a paradigmatic shift from teacher-centric pedagogical methods towards student-centric methods. Researchers largely agree over the potential benefits and better learning outcomes of student-centered approaches than the conventional teacher-centered classroom practices. The former approach is also believed to be providing relatively favorable environment for critical thinking, which broadly encompasses practices such as students’ participation, interaction, collaboration, questioning, reasoning, analyzing and so on. In other words, the student-centered approach puts student (learner) at the heart of learning activity. In view of the potential advantages associated with student-centered approaches towards pedagogy, we witness that the trends are yet to change in the context of Pakistan. One observes that the teaching and learning approaches are predominantly teacher-centered with negligible amount of critical thinking permitted in classrooms. Traditionally, teachers are at the centre of activity in classrooms while the learners find themselves excluded in the process. The folk wisdom and cultural stereotypes promote the notion that the best teacher is the one who manages to impose pin drop silence in the classroom, and the ideal students are those who observe silence and remain obedient before teachers. Mostly, education in Pakistan encourages cramming without comprehension, and discourages constructive critical inquiry and productive reasoning.

A seasoned Pakistani scientist and educationist Pervez Hoodbhoy repeatedly voices his concerns over the pathetic state of affairs of education system with regard to critical thinking, critical inquiry and constructive reasoning. He observes, “…it is the value system that shapes modern
education and a modern mindset built upon critical thinking. Pakistan’s educational system, shaped by deeply conservative social and cultural values, discourages questioning and stresses obedience. Progress demands that ultimately the dead hand of tradition be cast aside…in seeking change of values, it will be important to break the absolute tyranny of the teacher, a relic of pre-modern social values” (Hoodbhoy, 2009:592). He further notes that, “Closed minds cannot innovate, create art and literature, or do science. Modern education is all about individual liberty, willingness to accept change, intellectual honesty, and constructive rebellion. Critical thought allows individuals to make a revolutionary difference and to invent the future. Else, they will merely repeat the dysfunction of the past”. However, he laments over the poor state of learning culture in Pakistan where “students memorise an arbitrary set of rules and an endless number of facts and say that X is true and Y is false because that’s what the textbook says. To develop thinking minds, change must begin at the school level. Good pedagogy requires encouraging the spirit of healthy questioning in the classroom”.

The present study sets to investigate the classroom situation with focus on teacher-centric/students-centric dimensions, and examine the use or denial of critical thinking. Problematizing the prevailing teacher-centric approaches, coercive learning and both the teacher and self-imposed silence of students, the study attempts to trace the sources of these approaches, and establish link between teaching-learning approaches, socialization patterns and cultural stereotypes. Critical thinking in the present context signifies a number of pertinent variables that include student-teacher interaction patterns in classrooms, amount of student participation, and the freedom to ask questions, reason or advance their individual analysis on the academic/theoretical issues.

**Critical thinking**

Critical thinking is a widely recognized vital soft skill across academia. The students require it at different phases of their schooling for academic success, employment purposes and upward professional mobility. Hatcher and Spencer (2005) argue that, “Critical thinking is an important and necessary skill because it is required in the workplace, it can help deal with mental and spiritual questions, and it can be used to evaluate people, policies, and institutions, thereby avoiding social
problems”. Critical thinking at the very basic level is an individual's ability to question and evaluate information. A critical thinker analyzes information, situation or contexts the way he/she views it. Critical thinkers tend to assert themselves through clear and objective appraisal of any received information. Other attributes of critical thinkers involve using abstract ideas, thinking open-mindedly, and communicating effectively with others. Contrary to critical thinkers, passive thinkers tend to answer questions with yes-or-no-view, considering their views and facts as the only sensible and the relevant ones. Uncritical thinkers usually undergo a narrow and egocentric worldview.

The roots of critical thinking are generally traced in two academic disciplines of philosophy and psychology (Lewis & Smith, 1993), whereas other scholars identify a third strand of critical thinking within the domain of education (Sternberg, 1986). Notwithstanding its widely held recognition as a vital academic discipline, the academicians are yet to reach a universally recognized definition of critical thinking. The basic reason for the lack of a uniform definition is its application in a number of academic disciplines. Within the educational approach towards critical thinking, Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy is widely cited as the most relevant to critical thinking whose focus is on teaching and assessment of high-order thinking skills. This taxonomy has hierarchical order with ‘comprehension’ standing at the bottom while ‘evaluation’ positions at the top.

Despite points of disagreement among philosophers, psychologists and educationists, scholars of the three schools agree, and share some commonalities on the definition of critical thinking. According to them, critical thinking encompasses the following qualities: Analyzing arguments, claims, or evidence (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990; Halpern, 2001; Paul, 2006); making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990; Paul, 2006; Willingham, 2007); judging or evaluating (Case, 2005; Tindal & Nolet, 1995); and making decisions or solving problems (Ennis, 1985; Halpern, 2001; Willingham, 2007). In addition, other behavioral traits that are relevant to critical thinking involve asking and answering questions for understanding (Ennis, 1985); defining terms (Ennis, 1985); identifying assumptions (Paul, 1992); interpreting and explaining (Facione, 2000); reasoning verbally, especially in relation to concepts of likelihood and uncertainty (Halpern, 1998);
predicting (Tindal & Nolet, 1995); and seeing both sides of an issue (Willingham, 2007).

The oft-cited dispositions most of the critical thinkers tend to demonstrate include inquisitiveness (Facione, 1990, 2000); the tendency to seek reason (Bailin, Case, Coombs, & Daniels, 1999); open-mindedness (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 2000); flexibility (Facione, 1990; Halpern, 1998); fair-mindedness (Facione, 1990); respect for, and willingness to entertain others’ viewpoints (Facione, 1990); and the desire to be well-informed (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990).

In view of the above theoretical explanations and conceptual constructs about the definition of critical thinking, the present study seeks to problematize the pedagogical practices and instructional approaches across academia in Pakistan. The research hypothesizes that cultural stereotypes and folk wisdom have profound imprints on the culture of teaching and learning across academia in Pakistan, and the above have deep affects on the development of students as thinking individuals.

Objectives of the study

- To determine the student-centric or teacher-centric patterns in the classrooms
- To trace the causes of the prevailing pedagogical paradigms
- To examine the effects on pedagogical approaches on students’ development of critical thinking

Methodology

Research design

The study executed a mixed-method involving quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Personal observations and first-hand experiences of the researchers also contribute to the findings of the study. Mixed methods is defined as research method in which the inquirer or investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of study. The purpose of applying mix-method design is to simultaneously collect both quantitative and qualitative data, put together and use the results to understand a
research problem. (Creswell, 2008:557). It is a useful design in which quantitative and qualitative data complement each other and facilitates valid and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under question. Interviews were conducted with participants for the triangulation purposes. The triangulation method was used to capitalize on the complementary nature of this design where questionnaires and interviews may counterbalance limitations of each other.

**Sampling and research tools**

A total of 101 students participated in the study. They were from different Bachelor Studies (BS) four-year academic programs offered at the university. In terms of gender representation, n=70 (69%) were male while n=31(31%) were female students. The researchers designed a 43-item questionnaire distributed randomly among 101 students. The data collection involved the following procedure: a questionnaire distributed among 101 participants, focus group interviews and observation. Questionnaires contained the following main sections: background information; items eliciting participants’ responses on critical thinking, class participation, teacher-student interaction patterns; and their opinions about certain context-bound observations. Furthermore, four sessions of focus group interviews were conducted in which participants were asked to answer questions and share their individual experiences on the same topic. A total of 40 students (10 each) participated in the interviews. The questions were open-ended allowing them to elaborate comprehensively on the subject. The responses of interviews were recorded with a digital video camera, and these were later transcribed for analysis. For analysis purpose, the interviews were thematically categorized and triangulated with questionnaires input.

**Data**

**Respondents' background information**

The respondents of the study were drawn from different faculties that included Engineering (n=22), Information & Communication Technology (n=17), Management Sciences (n=25), Life Sciences (n=27), and Arts & Basic Sciences (n=10). They belonged to Bachelor Studies (BS) from various departments and different batches ranging from second to eighth semesters. Similarly, the respondents belonged to diverse linguistic backgrounds speaking nine different languages,
representing different regions and provinces of the country. Linguistically, the participants belong to nine different major and minor languages spoken in different regions and provinces of the country. The purpose of presenting their linguistic background is to suggest that participants are drawn from diverse backgrounds, thus representing almost every part of the country. The following table gives linguistic background of 101 respondents who responded to the questionnaires:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Pashto</th>
<th>Punjabi</th>
<th>Saraiki</th>
<th>Burahvi</th>
<th>Balochi</th>
<th>Urdu</th>
<th>Persian</th>
<th>Sheena</th>
<th>Torwali</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Awareness about critical thinking**

Generally, students in Pakistan have limited knowledge about critical thinking as an academic subject or discipline. Their restricted know-how is due to the fact that unlike universities across the developed world or a number of other Asian countries, a small number of universities in Pakistan teach critical thinking as a stand-alone course. The purpose of eliciting this information was to ascertain the respondents’ background knowledge of critical thinking. The response suggests that more than half of the participants with (55%) indicate they have never studied critical thinking at all while (24%) have studied it as a topic, and only (22%) have studied it as a subject. The results cumulatively show that the respondents’ level of understanding and background knowledge is considerably low. The following table is indicates their awareness about critical thinking:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I study/have studied Critical Thinking:</th>
<th>as a subject</th>
<th>as a topic in a subject</th>
<th>never studied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n=22(%)</td>
<td>n=24(%)</td>
<td>n= 55(%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors supporting learning and critical thinking

This section of questionnaire sought participants’ experiences and observations against items that were to positively influence learning, create an enabling environment for smooth and meaningful communication in classroom. The items were designed in likert scales such as always, often, sometimes, rarely and never. The total responses were calculated, and the cumulative percentages were drawn. Following is a list of the situations/contexts presented before participants:

- **I participate in class.**
- **I ask questions in class.**
- **My teachers teach through discussion/questioning.**
- **Whenever I have problems with a subject/topic, I ask questions in class without any fear or hesitation.**
- **Whenever my classmates have any problem with a subject/topic, they can ask questions without any fear or hesitation.**
- **Teachers allocate sufficient time for questions and answers.**
- **My teachers willingly (happily) answer all questions.**

Having calculated all the responses, the cumulative responses result in following graph:
Figure 1: Factors enabling participation and critical thinking

The above figure illustrates the cumulative responses of the participants towards the above listed seven items. All the items are believed to be providing enhanced levels of learning, ensuring a certain degree of critical thinking. The numbers as a whole are indicative of favorable classroom environment. As the figures suggest, 31% of the participants report that they always experience the above situations in their classrooms while 27% happens to experience the above circumstances often. Similarly, 25% of the participants believe they sometimes enjoy the luxury of above conditions. Furthermore, a relatively smaller segment 12 % and 5% of participants respectively choose rarely and never.

Given what the respondents suggest about the above given classroom situations and the relatively higher ratios of the classrooms being always (31%) and often (27%) supportive for better class participation and critical thinking, the approach of the respondents is far from being critical and realistic. It is so because the researchers’ first-hand experience, and participant, and non-participant observations show that normally very few students either ask questions or meaningfully participate in the classrooms. Practically, baring a few students who are normally top rankers of the class, majority of the students stay silent in the classrooms. Similarly, the figures regarding teacher’s willingness to entertain all questioners and facilitate full student participation appear exaggerated and unrealistic. The dichotomy between what they suggest to these particular segments and the next sections of the questionnaire will clearly emerge in the responses. In addition, narratives of the respondents during interviews also point to the dichotomy between what the students show and the actual classroom situations.

Factors negating (minimizing) class participation and critical thinking

This section of questionnaire sets to elicit participants’ opinions about some of the classroom-based and context-bound observations. Based on experiences and observations in the university, the researchers presented before participants some classroom-based participation and critical thinking related conditions, and sought their experiences. Following is a list of those conditions, which the researchers believe, can significantly minimize student-
centered learning and negatively affect critical thinking.

1. Teachers usually take questions personally.
2. Teachers usually create tense/stressful environment in class.
3. Students usually do not ask questions because they feel asking questions will make teachers punish them.
4. Teachers usually give low marks and fail students who frequently ask questions.
5. Our classrooms are usually teacher-centered (means teachers occupy much more time than students)
6. Teachers are usually biased (partial); they focus some best students and ignore many others
7. Teachers allow only their favorite students to talk/discuss/question in the class
8. Teachers usually do not like students who argue/debate in class.
9. Teachers usually prefer those students who keep silent/don’t ask questions in class
10. To please teachers and get good grades, students strategically keep silent in class.
11. When students disagree/reason with teachers, they receive punishment in shape of failure or low grades

In order to explore participant’s views on the above items, their opinions were sought through likert scale with agree, strongly agree no opinion, disagree and strongly disagree. Subsequently, in order to quantify responses in the form of a statistical presentation, the scales were further broken down into three categories: (a) agree+strongly agree (b) neutral, and (c) disagree+strongly disagree. Importantly, since the exercise or presence of the above conditions negatively influence their learning and critical thinking patterns, therefore the respondents’ agreement/strong agreement amounted to unfavorable whereas disagreement/strong agreement amounted to unfavorable conditions. After calculating the responses to the above items, the cumulative ratios/percentages resulted in following graph:
The cumulative results suggest that 47% of respondents indicate that their classrooms fail to provide with the above-listed items, the items that are believed to be favorable for learning and making critical thinking happen in classrooms. A noticeably lesser section of them reports that their classrooms do offer favorable environment for learning as well as critical thinking while 13% of the respondents stay neutral giving no opinion. Considering their responses to items (items believed to facilitate learning and critical thinking) in the previous figure, the respondents demonstrate inconsistency in their approach. As we witness, a significant segment of them indicated in the previous figure that their classrooms environment suited learning and critical thinking. At this point, one can detect a sense of inconsistency in respondents’ responses to some of the items specifically the ones such as “I participate in class”, and “I ask questions in class”. Their responses respectively suggest the given percentages: always (44%), often (27%), Sometimes (18%), and always (28%), often (21%) and sometimes (28%). Based on personal experiences and the results of focus group discussions, the researchers observe that their responses to these very items are
exaggerated because practically, more than 90% students usually observe silence while only few students take to active participation. The same applies to questioning in the class wherein only few students ask questions while the majority of them are laidback. Notably, the emerging dichotomy and inconsistency in the nature of responses itself suggests the level of critical thinking these students hold, and the level of critical thinking they have been inculcated over the course of their academic studies.

**Number of presentations and questions in class**

This section sought to determine the number of presentations during a semester and the number of questions they ask per semester. The purpose behind asking for this information was the observations that students within universities happen to experience limited opportunities for presentations in class. For instance, a student of 8th semester revealed that he had delivered a presentation only once during eight semesters. A significant number of students raised the same issue saying that they have had few opportunities for class presentation.

Table 3: Number of presentations and questions in class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1-3 times</th>
<th>3-5 times</th>
<th>5-8 times</th>
<th>More times</th>
<th>N. A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of presentations I have made per semester</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of questions I have asked per semester</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of occasions when I experienced activity-based, task-based learning throughout my studies</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of presentations I have made throughout my studies</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above table indicates that the majority of them (n=64) suggests that they made from 1-3 presentations during a semester. The second row indicates the number of questions they asked during a semester. The third row gives away the occasions when they experienced any collaborative learning in the form of activity, role-play or a task. A significant number of them (n=39) indicates that they had such occasion from 1-3 times while (n=17) report they never experienced such leaning opportunities.

**Discussion**

Two themes clearly transpire from the data: the classrooms are characterized by the teacher-fronted pedagogies and a small segment rather than the whole class participates and ask questions in the class. This section attempts to highlight the major themes, and discuss critically the potential causes that give rise to the prevailing teacher-centered and student-minimized instructional approaches, and the students’ tendencies to observe self-imposed silence in classrooms.

*Teacher-centered versus learner-centered paradigms*

A significant number of participants suggest that teaching methodologies and instructional approaches are predominantly teacher-centered. For instance, 55% participants agree that their classes are usually teacher-centered while a relatively lower segment of 26% disagrees with this observation. In addition, a considerable portion of 19% prefers to stay neutral. Thus, the statistics from questionnaire and personal narratives of the participants during focus group interviews substantiate the fact that the classes are mostly teacher-fronted and teacher-dominated while the learners (students) stand on the margins. To a significant extent, the researchers’ personal experiences and observations also tell almost identical classroom scenario.

As the word signifies, the term student-centered is a method of learning or teaching, which puts the learner at the centre (MacHemer & Crawford, 2007; Boyer, 1990). The student-centered learning is premised on the philosophy that learner is at the heart of learning process. This approach is diametrically opposed to the conventional or traditional approach that tends to view students as passive recipients of information. Within the conventional learning approach, the pedagogic method employed is traditionally one of “lecturing, note-taking, and memorizing information for later
recognition or reproduction” (MacLellan and Soden 2004: 254). In general, we observe that the conventional teacher-centered approaches are marked by low level of learners’ participation where teacher acts as the sole source of knowledge, and that this largely non-participatory approach seldom allows learners to ask questions, conduct discussions, or challenge the information of the teachers. The classroom setting is usually that of lecture theatres, laboratories and conventionally set up classrooms with a podium in the centre for teachers and, chair set up in orderly manner facing the teacher, with whiteboards placed in front. Teacher is exclusively responsible for designing the curriculum, setting examination tasks and assessment procedures. The activities are almost exclusively exam and grades oriented.

In view of the characteristic features of the teacher-centered teaching and learning approach and learning outcomes, a vast majority of participates’ of the present study refers to their teachers’ methodologies as teacher-centric. They are so because the instructional approaches and classroom exercises show identical conditions we usually associate with teacher-centered approaches (refer to table 3). As a significant number of participants confirm the teacher-centric nature of teaching methodologies, therefore, one could theoretically argue that classrooms in the present context fail to provide enabling environment for critical thinking to grow. It is pertinent to highlight that the proponents of student-centered approaches derive inspiration from the theory of constructivism or constructionism (Dewey, 1963; Piaget, 1954 and Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism is based on the idea that in order to learn effectively, learners must construct and reconstruct knowledge. The methodology favored by constructivism tends to encourage learner-centered environment. It also lays emphasis on devising flexible learning modes and methods.

Researchers associate numerous disadvantages with teacher-centric approaches. Learners are exposed to teacher-dependent environment and passivity. Moreover, since teachers occupy the centre and do the talking all the while, the learners hardly find sufficient opportunities to engage meaningfully in the learning process, and capitalize on dispositions that traditionally mark critical thinking such as inquisitiveness, collaboration, open-mindedness, the tendency to reasons or the desire to be well informed, and construct or see others construct knowledge. However,
in stark contrast to passivity-oriented teacher-fronted methods, the student-centered learning experience is not a passive one, as it is based on the premise that ‘student passivity does not support or enhance … learning’ and that it is precisely ‘active learning’ which helps students to learn independently (MacHemer & Crawford, 2007:11). Importantly, student-centered approaches transform the role of both teachers as well students as the teacher is viewed as a facilitator and guide, rather than as the main source of knowledge. It empowers students and changes the role of a teacher from the mere ‘transmission of knowledge to supporting and guiding self-regulated student learning’ (Van Eekelen, Boshuizen, & Vermunt, 2005:447).

**Non-participation and low-participation— the causes**

Non-participation of students is a major emerging theme. The participants of this study have come up with a number of reasons of non-participation. One observes that class non-participation, learning and critical thinking are deeply interlinked as non-participation results in silence; therefore, it is entirely opposed to the overall spirit of critical thinking and active engagement. We have defined some of the prominent features of a critical thinker are that they pose questions, remain inquisitive, carry searching minds, many factor force students to stay silence and avoid participation. The following lines briefly highlight some of the emergent factors of non-participation as shared by the respondents:

*Shaky linguistic and communicative competence*

A larger pool of students escapes from class participation because they do not trust their linguistic skills and overall communicative competence. Both perceived and real deficiency in the above two important elements prevent them from taking part in the proceedings. Although, these students demonstrate a certain degree of receptiveness and ambition within themselves, however, they do not chance questions for their shaky linguistic and communicative competence. Some students revealed that most of the time, they ambitiously desire to ask questions, and they do have serious questions in their minds, but fear of losing balance make them become silent. For instance, a large number of students from 1KPK disclosed that they

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1 KPK stand for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, one of the provinces of Pakistan.
strategically avoid class participation because they are not fluent enough in Urdu, the medium of communication in majority of the classes. This fact might surprise many, but it is true that students from the KPK province struggle in the Urdu language. The apparent reason being the lack of sufficient exposure and experience of Urdu in their schooling and surrounding. Thus, the sociolinguistic realities of a monolingual and Pashto-dominated milieu would have played significant part in deficiency in the Urdu language. Similarly, English language still poses serious challenges than the Urdu language in classrooms. In conjunction with linguistic deficiency in Urdu and English languages, a good number of them have hardly received opportunities for questioning of the kind in schools. Lack of training might also have been one of the factors in low or no class participation.

**Lack of interest in subject material**

Lack of interest in a subject or a topic is another reason of non-involvement. Lack of interest may be motivated by student’s aptitude, toughness of the subject, incomprehension of the contents or the boring teaching method of the concerned teacher. The contents and methods at times hardly excite their interest.

**Teachers’ rudeness**

The participants of the study revealed that rude behavior of the teacher also force passivity. For instance, a rude response to students’ query not only demoralizes him/her occasionally, it is also bound to spread apprehensions among other fellows. A rude behavior is normally expressed through ridicule, undue snubbing, sarcastic comments, harsh verbal comments directed against students to silencing them.

**Teachers’ irresponsive postures**

In addition to the factors of non-participation on part of students, participants of the present study have shared revealing narrative as to how teachers force students to silence. For instance, when asked to explain on a topic or a segment of a topic, the teacher cleverly delays answer saying he/she would explain it later, and never does he/she explain it later. Some teachers, on being questioned, tend to react sharply throwing the same question back to the same students, asking to explain it themselves. The participants also observed that some teachers react angrily to students’ questions by snubbing that “they should not be asking
such stupid questions” or “be shameful of such childish questions”, and answers of the kind that only rebuke. Some teachers also cleverly dodge students’ questions by saying that “At this age and level, they should know these basic things”.

Communication anxiety in the presence of classmates

Others will laugh at me if I speak up. As discussed previously, group consciousness and social conformity rather than deviance is deeply embedded within the minds of the students. The students are generally conscious about other students as well as teachers in classrooms. A vast majority of students avoids class participation and questions because they fear other might laugh at them or make fun of what they ask about. Thus, such anxiety forces many students to stay back in the class, and suppress their instinct of critical inquiry not because his/her inquiry is worth laughing; rather the motivation for social harmony and pleasure of others force them to stay quiet. In other words, the anxiety of others stops from asking questions.

Teachers’ unequal treatment of students

Teachers do have their favorite students in class whom they generously entertain when it comes to answering questions or interaction of the kind. The participants also unfolded that especially some teachers tend to encourage the frontbenchers and some of the toppers of the class while leaving the majority of relatively poorer students to become marginalized.

Imposition of silence for discipline

A good number of teachers strategically or habitually create a tense and stressful atmosphere in their classes. These teachers tend to lay strict rules of the game regarding silence and discipline in the class. Discipline is equated with silence in class. Thus such anxiety-laden classroom environment not only creates fears in students, it greatly impedes their overall learning.

Teachers’ powerfulness in the semester system

Systemic factor such as the semester system also augments students’ anxieties. Teachers in the semester system are more powerful, and are in a better position to watch over students all the semester around. He/she is also responsible for marking and evaluation of the students; therefore, to get through smoothly, the students deliberately keep silence to please their teachers. Majority of the students revealed that majority of the
students remain silent in the class or void questions for they cannot risk their marks. It is so because many a time, the teachers punish those whom they believe are mischievous students who deliberately disturbed him/her with questions within the class. A large number of students fall the victim of teachers’ personal grudges.

**Other causes**

A large number of students join the class late; therefore, they miss some of the earlier part of lecture to catch up with other students. This may cause them to observe silence in classrooms. Many others prefer to stay calm and quiet on the backbenches. These students habitually take no interest either in studies or in class participation. Most of the teachers tend to ignore such students.

**Socialization patterns, cultural value and teaching-learning practices**

Traditionally, the teaching-learning practices within the academia in this part of the world are characterized by teacher’s upper-handedness and students’ obedience as the figures above suggest. Locally, students’ obedience and teachers’ domination is a taken-for-granted exercise. Contextualizing the issue in a broader term, the teacher-dominated teaching and learning practices replicate not only the local culture within the academia, it also reflects the macro level socialization patterns, cultural values and norms prevailing across the region. In his insightful book on differences in the Eastern and Western patterns of socialization, titled as ‘Why Asians are Less Creative than Westerners, the Singaporean scholar Ng Aik Kwang (2001), identifies characteristics that demonstrates why passive culture is deeply entrenched in the Asian culture. According to him, while dealing with others, Westerns are inclined to be frank and direct, tend to put themselves apart from others and establish their distinctness. Their emphasis is on individuality. In addition, the concept of self in the West centers on self-interest rather following a group. Contrary to the Western culture, the Asians tend to be “psychologically dependent on the in-group, and conform to it instead of following the wishes and desires of his own heart”. Individuals tend to stay within the established confines, stand up for social harmony and order, and uphold social rules and norms of the in-groups. Emotions are “other-focused”. Reassuring sociability and gaining group’s approval motivate this behavior. Importantly, Ng (2001) advances that emphasis is laid on respect and obedience to parents is rather than to foster
self-reliance in the children. Ng (2001:29) further contends that:

The cultural emphasis on filial piety means that children from a traditional Asian family are raised in terms of whether their conduct meets some external moral criteria, e.g., not being rude to one’s parents or not treating them in a disrespectful manner. Dependence of the child on parents is encouraged, and breaking the will of the child, so as to obtain complete obedience, is considered desirable.

Because of different socialization patterns, a child in the Western world tends to assert his/her uniqueness, and it provides scope for criticism in the surrounding. Thus, the emphasis on obedience in the Asian context limits a child’s capacity to look beyond the parameters of social norms and folk wisdom. The social upbringing naturally strangulates a child’s potential for creative and critical thinking, and the surrounding paves way for authoritarian teaching structure and suppressive culture. Traditionally, as a member of in-group, the role of a student remains to obey the teacher, absorb the information by the teacher without questioning or reasoning (Ng, 2001).

In the context of the present study, we find that educational institutions especially schools in Pakistan hardly cultivates in students the habits to create, innovate or think or do out of the box. Majority of schools have reduced to cramming and reproduction nurseries the purpose of education is merely the observance of certain typical rituals such as homework assignment, terminal examinations, grade determination. The teachers neither provide opportunities for reflective writing nor encourage any creative exercise. As Hoodbhoy (2009) points out, the students are made not to think beyond textbooks and notebooks. In this exercise, the sense of social harmony, in-group concerns and the consciousness of social cohesiveness do limit students’ cognitive, critical and intellectual capacities, and force them to please rather than question.

Cultural stereotypes, folk wisdom and critical thinking

The Pakistani society is still conservative and traditionalist. The people tend to adhere fiercely to the old customs, conventions and the belief system of ancestors. As compared to urban areas or towns, the trends are deeply entrenched in the rural areas and villages. It is to note that more than 70% of
the population lives in the rural areas. The traditions and belief system also make their way to the schooling system and influence the academic culture where the cultural stereotypes and folk wisdom leaves profound effect on the teaching and learning exercise, and the teacher-student relations. The following lines highlight some of the cultural stereotypes and discuss its effects on behavior of the students in relation to critical thinking within the educational context.

**Don’t talk when elders are present**

It is an established practice particularly in traditional families and rural settlements, which dictates children to observe silence in the presence of elders. A junior family member speaking before seniors takes the form of a taboo in certain tribes and regions. The elders tend to uphold the age-old tradition with pride, handed down by their ancestors. Deviation from the set norms is tantamount to disrespect and impertinence. These instructions and prescriptions cast a deep spell on children and shrink space for communication. The same even affect their ability to communicate with teachers in schools. Since the conventional standards accentuate silence before elders, therefore, the child follows the same dictates, as the teacher happens to be an elder too. Strict observance to the communication related cultural and moral standards have profound role to play in shaping the capacity for class participation and critical evaluation of the things. Thus, the authoritarian dictates from home travel to schools and further stages of education, leaving children shy, timid and under-confident. Consequently, they are made to prefer silence to assertiveness.

**Be obedient before teacher because he/she is a spiritual father**

The traditional interpretation of teacher-student relation, which is ultimately connected to Islamic tradition, suggests that teacher is a spiritual father. Parents categorically dictate their children that a teacher is like their spiritual father, therefore, they are morally obliged to submit their will before teachers, and refrain from any such act, which societally amounts to impertinence. The child is obliged to obey the spiritual father. The parameters and definitions of disobedience are drawn from the top ranging from loud speaking to questioning and reasoning. While indoctrinating the notion of obedience, the parents have positive intentions—that is to foster in their child a sense of academic discipline and instill an organized social behavior, however, the child misinterprets
the message. Misinterpretation signifies that the child submits his will and individuality entirely to the teacher, and resorts to absolute passivity. The child acts on presumption that the teacher is a paragon of excellence and a treasure of knowledge, therefore whatever information flows from him/her, would be an absolute truth and unchallengeable logic. Irrespective of the actual qualifications and character of the teacher, the child is bound to honor him/her. These presumptions, indoctrinated by parents and societal norms force the child to regard questioning or reasoning with a teacher a deviation from the established expectations. Expectations suggest that a child needs to listen only. Thus, these and a number of other such stereotypes, inspired by the age-old traditions, which have merely a sentimental rather than rational base, coerce children to simple listeners and best followers.

Teachers’ favorite students are those who remain quiet, humble and obliged

To be a quiet, humble and obliged student are the merits that add to popularity and favor. These are the potential merits to win the teachers’ sympathy. Especially at the schools levels, no student can move an inch without the consent of the teacher. The conventional standards suggest the best teacher is the one who imposes pin drop silence in classroom, and the ideally managed classroom is the one where teachers manages to impose pin drop silence on students. Quietude on part of students and authoritativeness on part of teacher are the most desired qualities in teaching-learning culture across the schools. On the contrary, the qualities like assertiveness, self-assurance, self-confidence, critical thinking or outspokenness, the attributes usually associated with brilliant students in other parts of the globe, are taken as mischief and brazenness.

Give physical punishment to the boys if you want them to behave well

Physical punishment in the shape of beating, kicking and slapping is termed as essential for the child to behave well. Many parents view it as a tonic for child. Otherwise, the child will become astray and uncontrollable for parents. To put a check on children, parents particularly father regularly intimidates and pressurizes children, boys being the worst victims. This form of parental care and socialization patterns are bound to affect children’s confidence to challenge other views, put forwards one’s own position, and engage in positive
reasons. Children in the traditional families with little or low education background are the frequent victims of physical torture. This practice is especially rife in the rural areas and villages. In the villages, we observe that child’s father pays special visit to ask schoolteacher to punish the child as they think this punishment will make the child disciplined in his studies and reform his social behaviors. Such punishment applies only to the male children. The situation with regard to physical punishment is relatively lower than in the villages. The collaborative physical punishment by father and teachers results in the child losing the courage to speak up and crushing the assertive tendencies.

Culture of corporal punishment within schools

One of the major sources of silencing students is the exercise of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is a routine affair in schools across Pakistan. Its use, however, is more severe in the government schools than the private schools. Teachers in the government schools are not accountable to anyone be parents or administrators while teachers in private schools tend to treat children relatively leniently for the commercial stakes involved. Similarly, conditions in the urban areas are slightly better than the remote rural areas. There have been awful reports of corporal punishment from government schools in the rural areas. Corporal punishment is in exercise because the parents and society endorses it. Brutal corporal punishment in schools casts a huge spell on children’s psychological state and general worldview. They come out of schools with a shaken confidence level. Stressful and anxiety-laden school culture drastically takes away their instinct to behave fearlessly before teachers in class. Ultimately, they are forced to remain silent and toe the mark of their teachers. The same fears travel with them to colleges and university levels that becomes a huge impediment in their development as confident communicators and results in a defensive outlook.

Conclusion

The study concludes that mostly teachers spearhead the teaching and learning processes while the students usually remain marginalized. The study traces the causes of such pedagogic approaches partly in conventional folk wisdom and partly in cultural stereotypes, which normally demand individual students to exercise
obedience to teachers and stay away from any kind of reasoning. Additionally, absence of professional training and teacher education are also critical in this context. Collectively, strict observance to cultural norms apparently limits opportunities for critical thinking, and mostly reduces space for what Hoodbhoy (2009:592) terms as “individual liberty, willingness to accept change, intellectual honesty, and constructive rebellion”. The system largely forces the students to capitulate before the high-handedness of the teachers.

In order for teaching and learning culture to transform, it would require a paradigmatic shift to take effect from the current antediluvian approaches to more sophisticated and academically informed approaches, operational in academia around the developed world. We would also require a radical departure and a positive breakaway from “the absolute tyranny of the teacher, a relic of pre-modern social values” as Hoodbhoy proposes. The teacher-centered conventional methodologies are far from paying any dividends as these force passivity and promote rote learning or memorization. Furthermore, conventional methods are primarily examination and grade oriented with least focus on genuine long-term learning. A host of scholars from Pakistan has signaled towards these vital issues in their research work (Hoodbhoy, 1998; Siddiqui, 2010; Rahman, 2004; Mustafa, 2011). For instance, Hoodbhoy (1998:252) incisively argue that in Pakistan, teaching heavily relies on dictation and “examinations are tests of memory”. These scholars rightly criticize the prevailing education system and instructional approaches, which they believe, produce rote learners and blind followers rather than conscientious critical thinkers with searching minds. The transformation would entail a comprehensive plan on part of the policy makers to arrange for rigorous professional training programs for the teachers and educate them about the modern-day pedagogical trends across academia. What are currently missing are the pathetic lack of professional training and a sense of professional commitment among teachers about the profession. Siddiqui (2010) proposes a holistic approach for the transformation of education who suggests that change should take at three levels: conceptual, pedagogical and attitudinal. Siddiqui (2010:62) proposes that:

Before expecting a change in the outside world, it is important that a change in the already existing beliefs of teachers should take place. The greatest challenge a teacher education program faces is to
facilitate teachers to re-conceptualize some basic educational issues and their own role in the system. Teachers should be facilitated to re-conceptualize the concept of teaching and learning in a given context through various ways, i.e., reflective journal, debriefing session, critical thinking, cooperative learning, and action research.

It is indisputable that cultural and conventional trends may be deeply entrenched, and may be casting profound effects on the teaching and learning culture; however, these can be effectively neutralized through some rigorous professional teacher education, accompanied with special focus on education of critical thinking. One may conclude that only critical teachers could disseminate critical thinking, and tolerate the same flourishing in their students.

References


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