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Dynamics of Classroom Participation: Evidence from Higher Education in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study was designed to determine the forms and level of classroom participation and to explore if active students, when teaching as prospective teachers in cooperative schools, facilitate their students' active participation. All students of the teacher education department in a multidisciplinary university constituted sample. In first phase, an observation sheet was used to achieve first objective and to indicate the active and passive students for observation at second phase. Findings suggested that senior class students participated more actively in class activities. Furthermore, active students were engaged in giving volunteer answers, asking relevant questions, giving forced answer, giving personal experience, reading book, giving example, using board and asking irrelevant questions respectively. In the second phase, selected active and passive students were observed in real classroom setting as prospective teachers when they were engaged in teaching practicum. Findings revealed that active (prospective teachers) made their students more active than passive students did.

Key words: *classroom participation, prospective teachers, observation, class activities*

Introduction

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A conducive classroom environment is a state where two-way interactions take place between students and teachers which promote teaching and learning process and build an eagerness to satiate both students and teachers. Wade (2014) explained that effective learning process involved active participation of teachers and students during classroom learning activities. Active classroom participation serves many purposes and has many advantages. While students participate actively, they share their ideas with others, gain self-confidence and learn new information. There is common hear from literature on classroom participation that the students who dare not participate in the classroom are unable to learn well.

The whole education system attempts to make students active participants. The curriculum focuses on such activities which promote active involvement of students. Teachers try to use various techniques to encourage and stimulate active student participation at the aim of getting positive outcomes at maximum level. Still, it remains a challenge for educators to facilitate learner participation in the classroom setting. To meet this challenge and to better understand the phenomenon, this study aimed at identifying the forms and level of classroom participation among university students through observation.

Literature Review

Active involvement of students is being encouraged and reinforced in the present classrooms. Interaction between teachers and learners is fundamental in the learning process. Literature remains inconclusive with reference to the definition of classroom participation. Specific behaviors are commonly associated with this term like asking or answering questions. As stated by Fassinger (1995), this term encompasses any questions or comments that the students raised or offered in the class. From Bippus and Young's (2000) point of view, participation means to take part in class discussions. Petress (2006) affirmed that participation comprised three sub-constructs (a) quantity, (b) dependability and (c) quality. Intricately, quantity signifies the number of opportunities which are given to students for constructive participation. Dependability means having students who can be relied upon to contribute relevantly, clearly and respectfully. Quality covers substantiation of valuable interaction.

Liu (2001) revealed that classroom participation could have four forms ranging from (a) full integration to (b) participation in the circumstances, to (c) marginal interaction and to (d) silent observation. However, these patterns are always not static in every place and. In full

integration, learners are fully engaged in class discussion with clarity of mind. In Participation in the circumstances, students carefully think and wait for appropriate time to speak out their opinion. During classroom discussion, they want to show appropriate active behavior. In marginal interaction, students tend to listen more and speak less. Lastly, in silent observation, students tend to avoid oral participation in the classroom. They seem to be active listeners only who avoid oral participation but accept whatever topic is being discussed in the classroom.

Similarly, Lee (2005) discovered that classroom participation encompasses verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors. Verbal or oral participation denotes to behaviors of taking part in class discussions, giving opinions or speaking in the classroom and asking and answering questions. Students who do not speak up are usually considered passive. Contrarily, nonverbal participation refers to students' responses such as raising their hands, nodding their heads, eye contact and body movements (Sayadi, 2007).

A rich literature is available to highlight the advantages of classroom participation. Researchers agree that active classroom participation helps students to become critical thinkers (Mustapha, Rahman, & Yunus, 2010b; Rocca, 2010), develop their knowledge, exhibit what they have understood as result of instruction, develop their confidence (Mustapha et al., 2010b) memorize less, function effectively in an independent society (Rocca, 2010) and to improve their communication skills (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005; Rocca, 2010).

Students feel the joy of sharing ideas and learn more effectively when they actively contribute to class discussion (Wade, 1994). It plays vital role in their academic success and personal development (Tatar, 2005). Active participants have higher persistence and higher satisfaction level (Astin, 1999) and tend to have better academic achievement (Abdullah, Bakar & Mahbob, 2012; Astin, 1999; Gomez, Arai & Lowe, 1995; Mustapha, 2010; Tatar, 2005; Theberge, 1994; Tsou, 2005). In short, there is a census among researchers that student's willingness and enthusiasm to participate in classroom through verbal engagements help create a conducive environment which guarantees effective learning. (Abdullah et al., 2012; Abraham, Shirrell, Downs-tepper, & Chakaravarthy, 2015; Davis, 2009).

Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones and Piccinin (2003) identified the forms and activities of classroom participation among 542 university students. They found that active participants,

more frequently, showed their prominence by raising their hands, more frequently interrupted their teacher and spoke for longer periods of time as compared to passive students.

Mustapha et al., (2010) collected students' perceptions to construct the meaning of classroom participation. Students revealed two ways of participation: primarily, interacting with teacher and students, asking and answering questions, sharing opinions, ideas, comments, jokes, personal experiences and stories, participating cooperatively in group activities and discussing about the current topic. Moreover, the term denotes to being completely involved in the class activities by attending class, focusing on lesson, listening to teacher and showing concentration in class activities and finishing academic tasks in the given time.

Abdullah et al., (2012) conducted classroom observations to identify forms and level of classroom participation. They observed three undergraduate and graduate level classes for five weeks. They found that the number of the active students was very low who were involved in giving opinion, asking questions and group discussion. Majority of the students were just listening, sitting quietly and doing other tasks.

No doubt, a bulk of literature has grown so far which deals with classroom participation throughout the world. Still, most of the studies are based on teachers' or students' perceptions about classroom participation instead of being based on observation. Among very few observational studies, not even a single was conducted in Pakistan. Hence, this phenomenon is still underexplored in Pakistan. For that reason, this study is designed to explore the forms and level of classroom participation, its role in prospective teachers' classroom practices.

The following research questions were formulated to address the objectives:

1. Which class (B.Ed Honors, MA or M.Phil) was the most active participant?
2. Which activities were active students involved in?
3. What did passive students do in class time?
4. What types of questions were asked by teachers to make students participate?
5. Do active students as prospective teachers involve their students more than passive students do?

Methodology

This was an observational study.

Sample

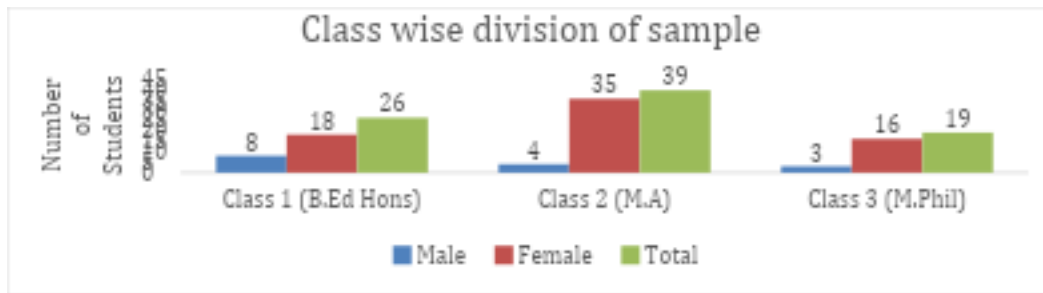


Figure 1. Class wise division of sample

This study was conducted at Government college university, Faisalabad. The participants were involved from B.Ed. Hons 4th semester (2020-2024), M.A Education 4th semester (2020-2022) and M Phil 2nd semester (2020-2022). These classes were nominated as class 1 (B.Ed. hons), class 2 (M.A 4th) and class 3 (M.Phil. 2nd). The total number of observations was 60.

The classes were observed for five weeks. Later on, class one and two were followed when they were involved in teaching practicum. Students were already categorized as active and passive during five weeks observation at university. In practicum schools, active (N=12) and passive (N=12) students were observed as prospective teachers. The main purpose of observations at that level was to explore whether active students as prospective teachers involve their students more than passive students do. They had to spend six (6) weeks over there in practice schools. During third and fourth weeks, all the students (N=24) were observed twice. A total of forty-eight (48) classes were observed.

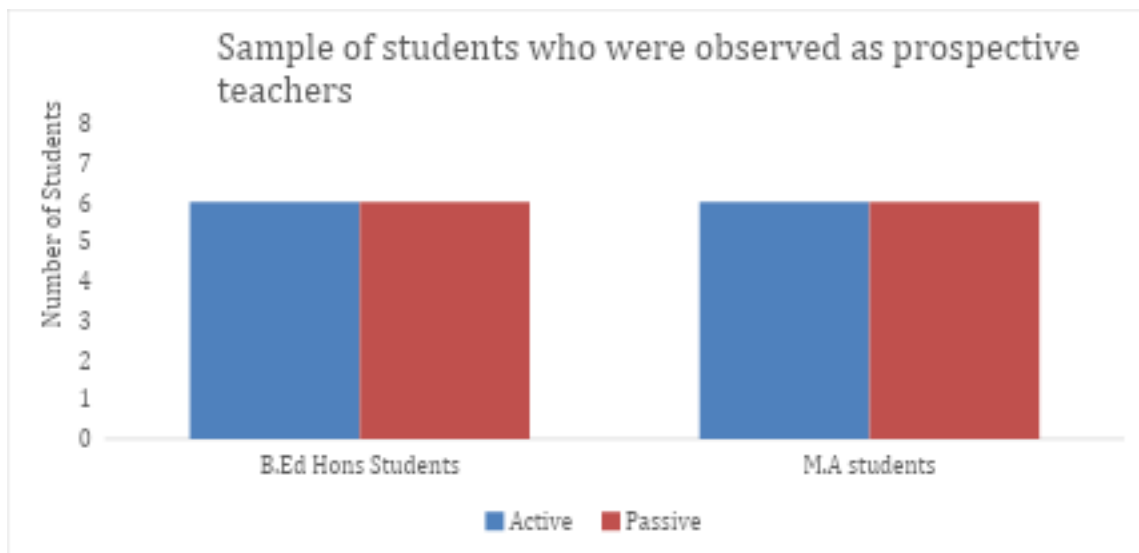


Figure 2. Sample of students who were observed as prospective teachers

Observation sheet

After literature review, a rough sketch of observation sheet was prepared. To check its practicability, five observations were conducted in a class which was not part of sample. Afterwards, content validation was done with the help of four experts. Soon after, five more observations were conducted with the help of a research assistant to ensure inter-rater reliability of the observation sheet. Inter-rater reliability of the final observation sheet was 0.96.

At first stage, university students were observed to distinguish between active and passive students and to find the forms and level of classroom participation. At second stage, it was used to observe prospective teachers when they were engaged in teaching practicum.

Data Collection

The current study was designed to determine the forms and level of classroom participation. The study was conducted in two phases to address the relevant research questions. In first phase, observation sheet was used to find out the forms and level of classroom participation and to find out the active and passive students for observation at second phase. The data of 60 observations were collected from three classes for five weeks. In the second phase, class one and two were followed when they were engaged in teaching practicum. Students were already categorized as active and passive during five weeks observation at university. In practicum schools, active (N=12) and passive (N=12) students were observed as prospective teachers. The major purpose of observations at that stage was to explore whereas active students as prospective teachers involve their students more than passive students do. They had to spend six (6) weeks over there in practice schools. During third and fourth weeks, all the students (N=24) were observed twice. A total of forty-eight (48) classes were observed. During the first observation, the observation sheet was not filled. The purpose of first observation was to build rapport with the school students whom prospective teachers were teaching. Data was collected when classes of prospective teachers were observed at second time so that true response of the teacher and students could be observed and observation effect could be minimized. Data were entered in Excel (2016 Version). After calculation of mean score, graphs were prepared.

Results

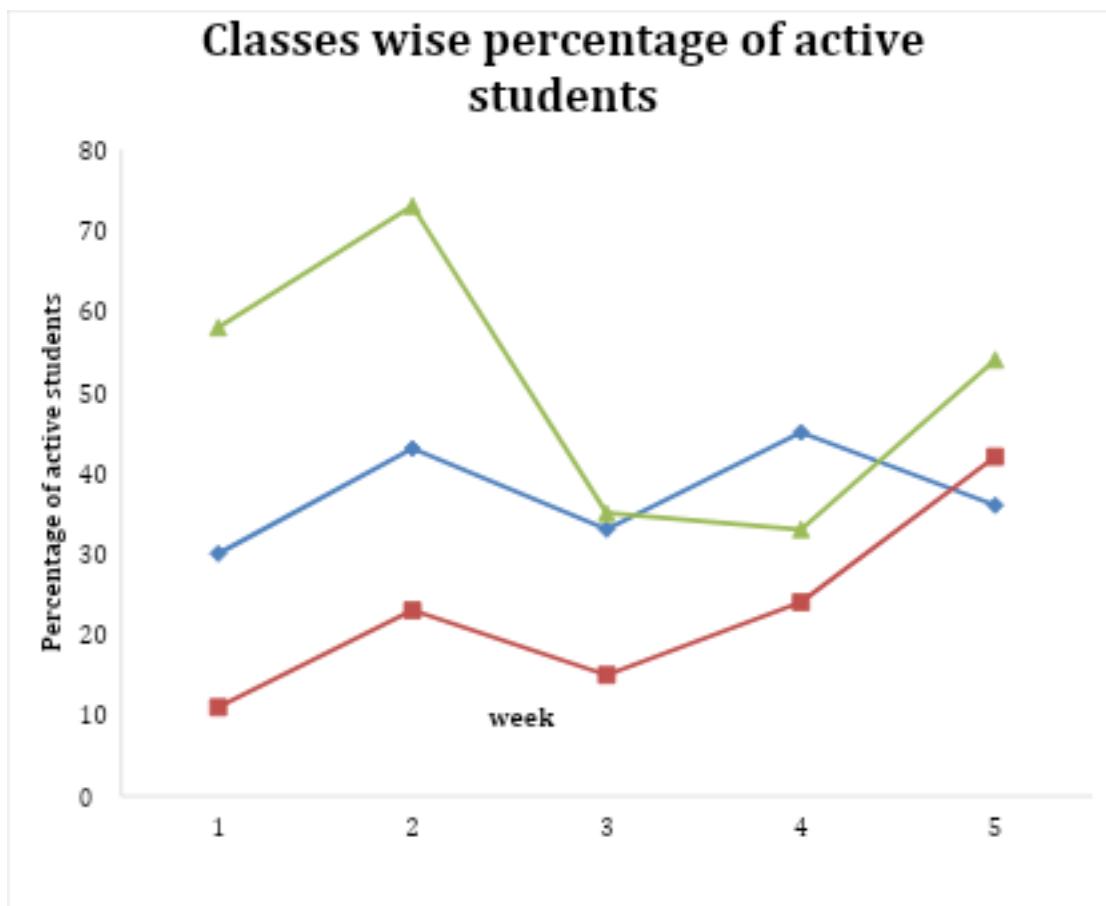


Figure 3. Class wise percentage of active students

Figure 3 depicts data of active students per class. The number of students was converted into percentage to make a vivid comparison as total member of students was different in the observed classes. It was observed that senior class students (M Phil) participated more actively in class activities as compared to junior students (B.Ed. Honors and MA). Taken as a whole, the highest level of participation can be seen in 2nd week whereas it was lowest in 3rd week. In general, the participation level was very low. From 1st to 5th week, only 33%, 46% ,28%, 34% and 44% of students remained active (M=37%).

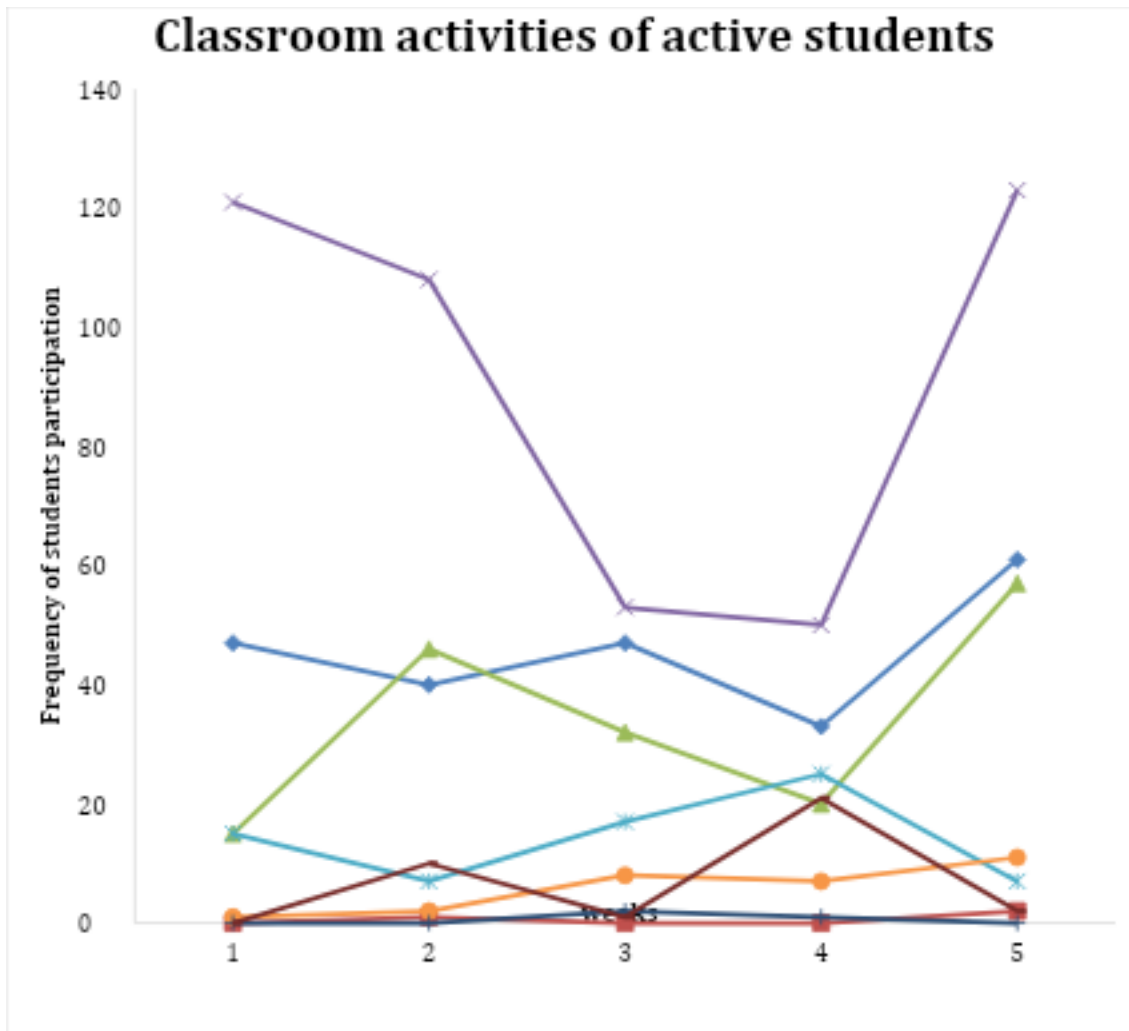


Figure 4. Classroom activities of active students

Figure 4 provides a picture of activities which active students performed during the whole observation span. It is portrayed that active students were engaged in giving volunteer answers, asking relevant questions, giving forced answers, giving personal experiences, reading books, giving examples, using board and asking irrelevant questions orderly. A wide gap between the number of students who answered voluntarily (T=455) and those who were forced to answer (T=170) signifies active students' confidence level. It shows their readiness to take part in class activities energetically. The large number of students who asked relevant questions as compared to the very few who asked irrelevant questions is also encouraging to notice.

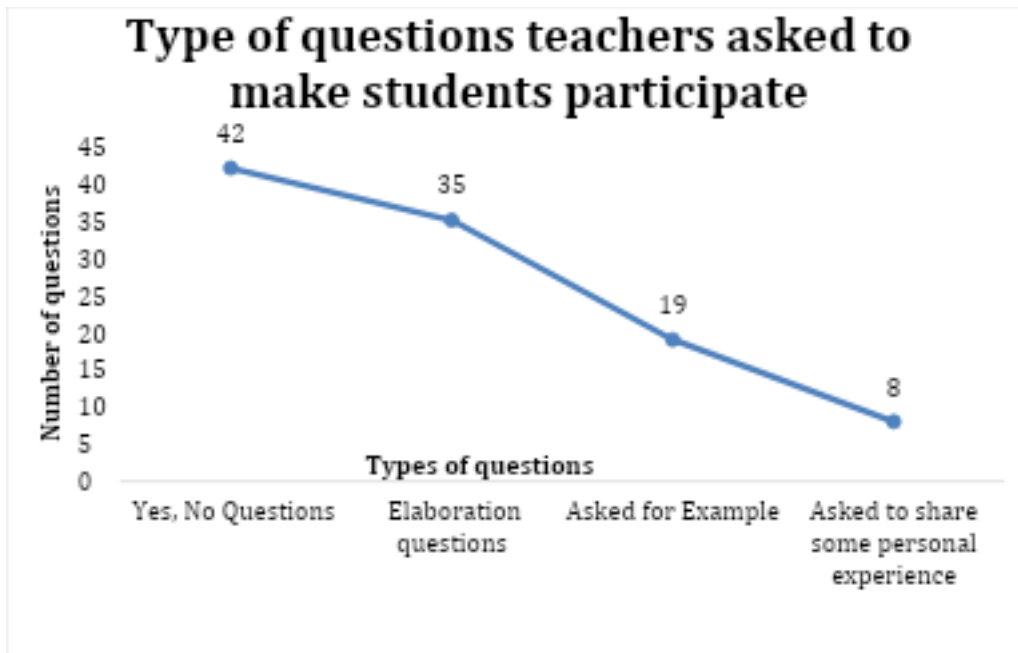


Figure 5. Type of questions teacher asked to make students participate

Figure 5 divulges the nature of questions which teachers pose to galvanize students. It is evident that yes, no questions were asked most recurrently followed by elaborate questions, asking for examples and personal experiences orderly.

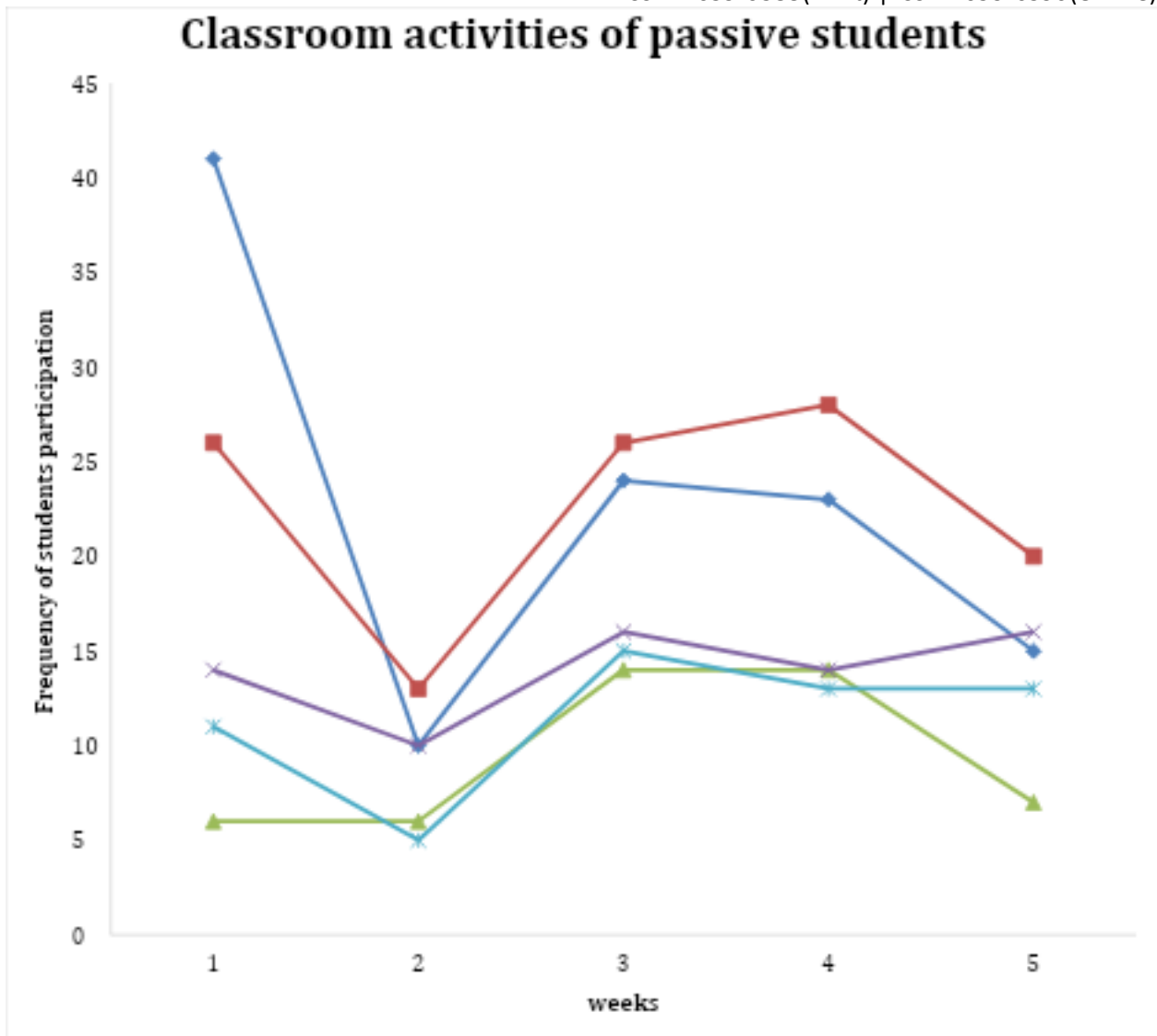


Figure 6. Activates of passive students

Figure 6 shows that passive students were sitting quietly, gossiping, not attending to teacher, pretending to reading and using mobile accordingly.

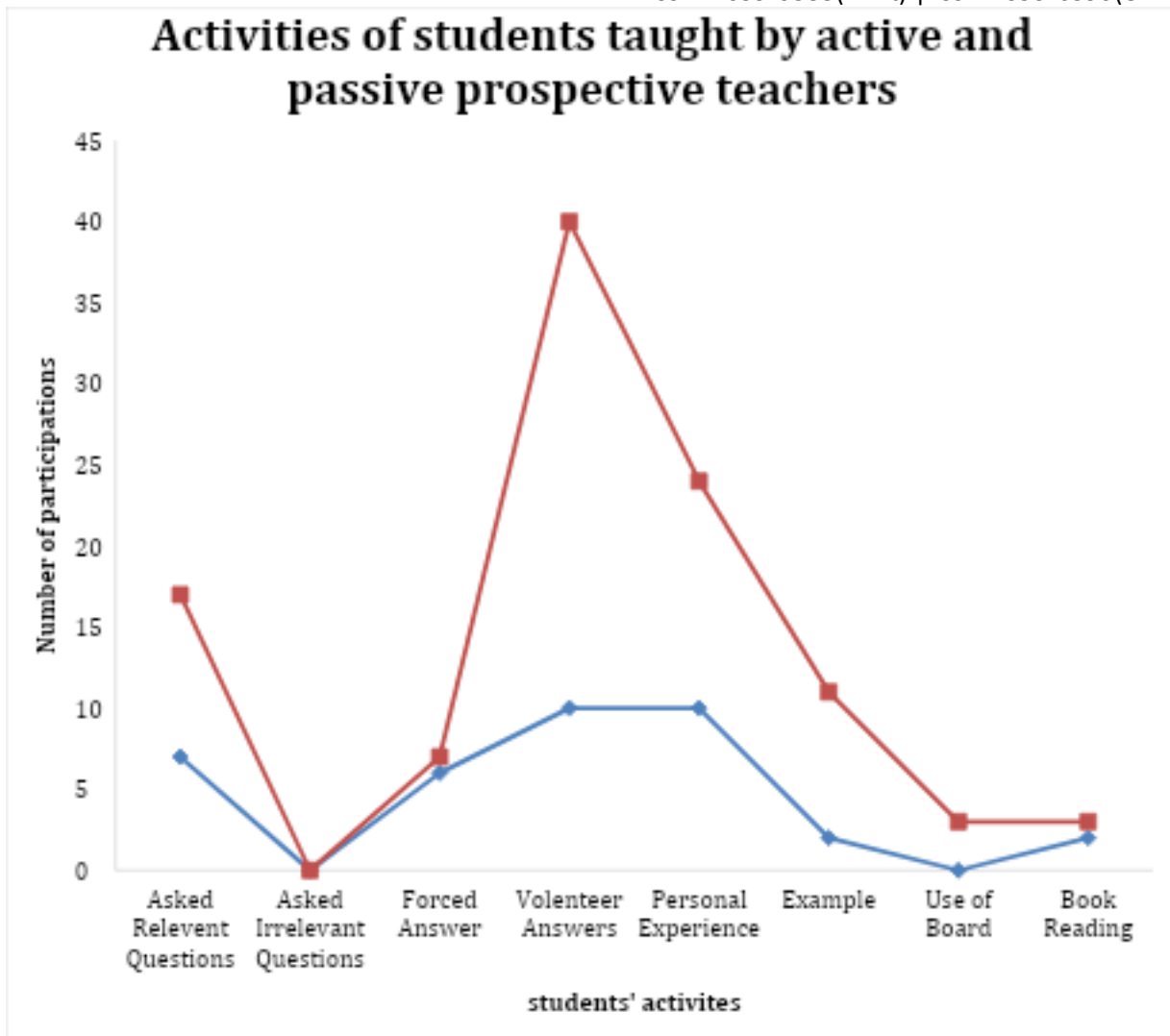


Figure 7. Activities of students taught by active and passive prospective teachers

In the second phase of study, selected active and passive students were observed in real classroom settings as prospective teachers when they were engaged in teaching practicum. Figure 7 reveals the data of students who were taught by prospective teachers declared as either passive or active students nominated as series 1 and series 2 orderly. It was found that the active students (prospective teachers) made their students more active compared to passive students whose students also remained passive. Students were engaged in activities such as giving volunteer answer, giving personal experience, asking relevant question, giving example, giving forced answer, using board, reading book and asking irrelevant question. In active teachers’

classrooms, the volunteer answer has the highest frequency of forty (N=40) while the personal experience has the second highest frequency of twenty-four (N=24) as compared to the passive teachers' classroom setting where the frequency of volunteer answer and personal experience is ten (N=10) for each.

Discussion

This study was designed to explore the forms and level of classroom participation, its role in students' achievement and in prospective teachers' ability to involve their students in class activities. The findings from the observation revealed some remarkable results. First of all, observation done on the three classes revealed that their participation level was very low. The findings are consistent with those of Abdullah et al. (2012) who found that majority of the students remain passive and do not take part in class activities. As stated by Liu (2001), classroom participation could have four forms: (a) full integration, (b) participation in the circumstances, (c) marginal interaction and (d) silent observation. In his view, the least of the students fall in the first category whereas most of them fall in the last category. When the participation level of three classes was compared with one another, it was observed that senior class students (M Phil) participated more actively in class activities as compared to junior students (B.Ed. Honors and MA). Senior students may feel more comfortable in the classroom compared to their counterparts since they have spent more time in university.

When forms of classroom participation were observed, it was discovered that students were engaged in giving volunteer answers, asking relevant questions, giving forced answers, giving personal experiences and reading books most of the time. Abdullah et al. (2012) also declared similar findings. They found active students to be involved in giving opinions, asking questions and group discussion.

Crombie et al. (2003) also affirmed that active participants raised their hands more frequently, interrupted teacher more frequently, and spoke for longer periods of time as compared to passive students. Mustapha et al., (2010b) revealed that active students interacted with teacher and students, asked and answered questions, shared opinions, comments, jokes, personal experiences and stories, discussed about a topic and took part in group activities.

Furthermore, this study reveals that a large number of students were sitting quietly, gossiping, not attending to teacher, pretending to read and using mobile. It was further observed

that passive students mostly choose to sit on back-benchers where they feel comfortable. They think that they are invisible to the teacher and now they can use mobile or do other irrelevant activities safely. The findings are consistent with those of Abdullah et al. (2012) who stated that majority of the students were just listening, sitting quietly and doing other tasks.

Another interesting finding emerged from follow-up data. It was found that the active students (prospective teachers) made their students more active compared to passive students whose students also remained passive. The observer, further, noticed that active students were more confident in their teaching techniques while passive students were afraid in classroom. They didn't have clear concepts about certain content. Teacher plays a significant role in making students speak up in the class. These findings are also in line with those of previous studies (Mustapha, Rahman, & Yunus, 2010a ; Kamarudin, Halim, Osman & Meerah, 2009).

Exploring the type of questions teachers asked students, it was discovered that yes, no questions were asked most recurrently followed by elaborate questions, asking for examples and personal experiences orderly. Yes, no questions were asked most frequently, which generally are considered to be the lowest order questions whereas data shows that teachers could not relate the lesson with students' personal life as they did not ask students to give examples from their personal life and share their personal experiences as frequently as they did for yes, no and elaboration questions. The highest frequency of yes, no question shows teachers' focus on cramming and rote memorization. On the questions teachers ask, research indicates that about 60 percent questions require only recall of facts, 20 percent require students to think, and 20 percent are procedural in nature (Blosser, 2000).

The study may assist teachers and researchers in understanding and identifying the students' classroom behavior which may ultimately help teachers to plan and create a conducive learning environment having more interactive and stimulating classroom activities. Teachers may be encouraged to implement various methods of active interactive teaching to stimulate active student involvement. The study may help the teachers in identifying passive students and in planning the ways to encourage them to actively participate in the classroom.

The current study may help teachers reflect on their own relevant practices and their weaknesses and their strengths. Administrators may get help from this study to guide their teachers regarding teaching strategies which improve classroom participation.

Recommendations

Low level of students' participation calls for inclusion of affective or emotional side of teachers' professional life. His emotional tone may promote supportive, safe and open class environment to make students speak up. The teacher may use cooperative teaching methods so that passive students could work in groups with active students and may get confidence of participating in different activities. Students were mostly found to be engaged in giving answers to teachers' questions. So, teachers should use interactive teaching methods such as role play, drama, quizzes and presentations to make students participate actively in class. Teachers must relate their lesson with students' personal life and ask them higher order questions which need elaboration and explanation so that students can learn the lesson in a better way. Teachers should try to involve back benchers in classroom actives continuously. He/she should give special attention to back-benchers and should keep moving the class to watch back-benchers.

Active students become good prospective teachers as compared to passive students. Passive prospective teachers should spend some extra time on lesson planning so that they can design some activities to make their students involved in. Gradually, with decreasing effort and increasing expertise, he/she can become such a teacher who can actively his/her class actively oriented. As this study was conducted in only one department of a university, its generalizability is limited. Further studies may be conducted on education levels other than higher education. It may also be significant to explore the determinants of classroom participation.

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