

THE NAIL THAT STICKS OUT

The practice of individuality in the East Asian classroom

Bachelor's thesis
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Itä-Aasian kulttuuri suosii käytöstä, jolla ei erotuta joukosta yksilönä, ja tämä näkyy Itä-Aasian luokkahuoneissa hiljaisuutena. Itä-Aasiasta kertovat luokkahuonetutkimukset ovat pitkälti keskittyneet siellä vallitsevaan kulttuurin suosimaan hiljaisuuteen ja yhteisöllisyyteen, eikä tutkimuksia ole juurikaan julkaistu itä-aasialaisten luokkahuonekäytöksestä muusta luokasta erottuvina yksilöinä. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii selvittämään milloin itä-aasialainen oppilas pystyy erottumaan vertaisistaan luokkahuoneessa ilman, että häneen kohdistuu paheksuntaa tai syrjintää.</p> <p>Aineisto kerättiin haastattelemalla kahta itä-aasialaista yliopisto-opiskelijaa heidän luokkahuonekokemuksistaan. Pääpaino oli kokemuksilla, jolloin haastateltavat pystyivät erottumaan käytöksellään joukosta ilman, että heihin kohdistui syrjintää. Haastattelun vastaukset ryhmiteltiin yhteisölliseen ja yksilölliseen toimintaan, ja vastaukset analysoitiin teorialähtöisellä analyysimallilla.</p> <p>Tutkielmassa käy ilmi, että vaikka yhteisöllinen käytös on vallitseva tapa Itä-Aasiassa, luokkahuoneessa voi silti erottua joukosta ilman negatiivisia seuraksia, jos tietyt kriteerit luokassa täyttyvät. Lahjakkuus tietyssä oppiaineessa, muun kulttuurin vaikutus ja opettajan rohkaisema yksilöllisyys olivat yksilöllisyyden hyväksymiseen johtavat keskeisimmät tekijät. Tutkimustulokset antavat tietyn kuvan Itä-Aasian hyväksyttävästä luokkahuonekäytöksestä kahden opiskelijan silmin, mutta tutkielman pienen otannan takia tutkielmassa kehoitetaan tulevaisuudessa suorittamaan laajempaa otantaa edustava tutkimus.</p>	
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Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION	3
2 EAST ASIAN CULTURE AND BEHAVIOUR	4
2.1 Collectivism, individualism and face	4
2.2 Elder respect in East Asia.....	5
2.3 East Asian culture in a classroom setting.....	5
3 THE PRESENT STUDY	6
3.1 Research questions	6
3.2 Data collection, participants and method of analysis	7
4 COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM IN THE EAST ASIAN CLASSROOM....	8
4.1 Impressions on collectivistic behaviour	8
4.1.1 Standing out.....	8
4.1.2 Challenging authority	10
4.2 Individualistic behaviour.....	11
4.2.1 Individualistic behaviour as the norm	11
4.2.2 Individualistic behaviour by elite students.....	11
4.2.3 Individualistic behaviour influenced by other cultures and age.....	12
5 CONCLUSION	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	16
APPENDIX	17

1 INTRODUCTION

‘The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.’ –Japanese proverb

Practicing individual action in an East Asian¹ classroom can be problematic for natives as East Asia is largely influenced by a collectivistic culture as opposed to an individualistic culture. A collectivistic culture emphasizes the importance of the group over the importance of the individual, and individual action in a collectivistic culture can be considered improper behaviour. Individual action can be anything that makes one stand out from the rest of the group, such as raising one’s hand or being overtly vocal in class. The East Asian teacher, at times wanting direct answers from the students, puts the students in a position that pressures them to practice individual action and to stand out while their culture encourages them not to stand out from the rest of the classroom.

Previous research has mostly focused on behaviour derived from the collectivistic side of East Asian classrooms (Chan 1999, King 2011). It has thus failed to describe the occasional moments when an East Asian student can practice individuality in a classroom setting, and what factors contribute to this phenomenon. The current paper will present an in-depth look into two East Asian students’ experiences and thoughts in order to provide a description of what factors contribute towards individual action in an East Asian classroom. For contrast, the paper will also present the students’ experiences on the dominant collectivistic side of classroom behaviour and their thoughts on other classmates who, at times, practice individuality in the classroom.

¹ In the current paper referring to East Asians addresses the population of countries that are heavily influenced by the philosophical and cultural principles of Confucianism such as Japan, China, Taiwan and South-Korea.

2 EAST ASIAN CULTURE AND BEHAVIOUR

2.1 Collectivism, individualism and face

People in collectivistic cultures are interdependent within their in-groups², give priority to the goals of the in-groups, shape their behaviour mainly according to the in-group's norms and behave in a communal way whereas people in individualistic cultures prioritize their personal goals over the goals of the in-groups (Mills and Clark 1982, cited in Triandis, 2001:909). In other words, collectivism emphasises the maintaining of group harmony through social relationships as opposed to an individualistic culture where the individual is encouraged to stand out and speak his/her own opinion. According to Yum (1988:375) the emphasis on social relationships in East Asia stems from Confucianism. East-Asia is largely dominated by a collectivistic view of culture and this often means that people do not want to stand out or voice their own opinions if it is not in harmony with the majority of a group in a particular setting.

The emphasis on social relationships as opposed to individualism is also prevalent in East Asians' face behaviour, which is more prominent when compared to the western world. In Asia, according to Kim and Nam (1998:529), the main motivation behind face behaviour is to "fit-in" as opposed to "stand-out" in order to secure the person's social legitimacy as a member of a group. In behaviour, this is done by trying to meet the person's minimum requirements of social status. In order to interact with cooperation and harmony, face behaviour is necessary for people of different social statuses.

As the definition of the concept of face is complex, the current paper presents various definitions: Leung and Chan (2003:1575) describe face as "the respect, pride, and dignity of an individual as a consequence of his/her social achievement and the practice of it"; St. Amant (2001:387) explains it to be "an individual's external public appearance" and Cardon and Scott (2003:10) state that "face relates to a person's image and status within a social structure".

To further understand the concept of face, one has to be familiar with the concepts of *losing face* and *saving face*. Kim and Nam (1998:527-529) explain that face is largely determined by

² A relatively closed social group

the evaluation of others. They explain that loss of face means loss of social status and that the consequences of this can be socially devastating for the individual. In Asia loss of face can happen through misconduct, and as one's self is defined by social relationships, one's misconduct can result in loss of face for the whole in-group. Kim and Nam (1988:528-529) describe an example of a work event in which the employer's praise of an individual results in the rest of the group feeling "defeated" and experiencing loss of face. They further hypothesize that this might then result in the individual lowering his or her effectiveness to restore group harmony and to restore face for the other members of the work group. Saving face is any behaviour that prevents the loss of face, e.g. preventing other people from seeing one's emotional breakdown by relocating one's self to a different room.

2.2 Elder respect in East Asia

Having respect, obedience and care for one's elders influences the behaviour of a younger person when interacting with an older one. The respect for elders in East Asia is heavily rooted in its culture in the form of a Confucian virtue known as *xiao* (孝) which commonly translates to filial piety, and is defined as being good to one's parents and ancestors (Xin-ming 2008:2).

Sung (2001:14) states that the most commonly accepted definition of elder respect is 'being courteous and obedient to elders'. The term 'elder' in Sung's article, in addition to one's own family members, includes the elderly in general, as well as teachers. The article also distinguished 14 different forms of elder respect, two of which are linguistic respect ('using respectful language in speaking to and addressing elders') and acquiescent respect ('being obedient to elders'). In East Asia teachers and elders in general are spoken to in a respectful tone and vocabulary, and their statements are seldom questioned or challenged openly as it could result in the teacher losing face in front of the class.

2.3 East Asian culture in a classroom setting

The cultural concepts of collectivism, face and elder respect can be seen in an East-Asian classroom setting in the form of silent students. Kim and Nam (1998:528) state that people from collectivistic cultures feel uncomfortable if singled out publicly even if the person is

more competent than the others. This can be seen as attributing to classroom silence. In Japan much less verbal communication occurs in an out-group³ (McDaniel 2003, cited in King 2011:65). A classroom setting can be seen as an out-group, as opposed to an in-group, if the students do not all know one another closely.

Chan (1999:298-299) states that in China certain teaching and learning styles are preferred in order to prevent shame, loss of face and to preserve harmony and that these styles stem from Confucian beliefs. Classroom behaviour, in the form of modesty and not expressing honest opinions, also stems from maintaining face and preventing shame due to possible poor performance.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Research questions

The cultural aspects of maintaining group harmony, saving one's face and respecting one's elders is common for East Asians, and can be reflected to a classroom situation where the teacher might, at times, want direct answers from the students. This puts the students in a position that could disrupt these cultural aspects. The students might lower their effectiveness in answering questions to save face and maintain group harmony by not separating themselves excessively from the standards of the group (rest of the students). The students also avoid challenging their teacher's knowledge out of respect by keeping their answers to the point.

The culture of East Asia encourages one to behave in a collective manner, yet instances of behaviour can occur where individualism is accepted by one's peers in the classroom. These instances of individualism and individualism in general are not widely researched as most studies focus on the collectivistic side of East Asian culture. By interviewing two East Asian university students on their classroom experiences throughout their school life, the current paper aims to study the less researched side of individualism in an East Asian classroom and find the answers to the following questions:

³ People who are not part of a specific in-group

Primary research question: **When do East Asian students feel comfortable enough to practice individuality in a classroom where the culture is dominantly collectivistic?** In what kind of situations can one practice individuality and what factors contribute to the practice of individuality in a classroom without being subject to judgement or exclusion by one's peers?

For background, the current paper aims to provide insight on the interviewees' thoughts and experiences on the collectivistic side of East Asian classroom behaviour. How do the interviewees usually behave in a classroom? Why do they behave the way they do? How do their classmates behave? What do the interviewees think of other students who practice individuality in a classroom?

3.2 Data collection, participants and method of analysis

The data was collected by separately interviewing two East-Asian university students: Tanaka⁴, a 20-year old male student from Japan, and Hualing, a 21-year old female student from Hong Kong, who is currently studying in the United Kingdom but has had most of her classroom experiences in Hong Kong. The interview was a semi-structured text-based interview done via social media. Both participants originate from a collectivistic culture and were aware that their culture prominently affected classroom behaviour in their own countries.

The form of an interview was chosen as it allows for a more in-depth description of the interviewees own experiences (Dufva 2011:132). The interview was chosen to be done via the Internet as, at the time of the data collection, one participant was studying in the United Kingdom and the other one in Japan. A text-based chat approach was chosen, as opposed to it being done through video chat, as video might have put the participants under pressure and thus shortening the answers. A text-based interview was also less time consuming to analyse, and the loose structure of the interview made it easier to ask subsequent follow-up questions in the hope of receiving the intended answer of the interviewee.

The interview data was analysed by extracting different factors (e.g. being young, teacher being foreign, etc.) from the interview that the interviewees thought to have contributed to their behaviour. The behaviour was then categorised as collectivistic, individualistic, or both.

⁴ The interviewees' names have been changed

Relevant connections were then made with the behaviour and the cultural concept (e.g. fear of standing out, respecting the teacher, etc.) that could have contributed to that particular behaviour. The analysis was based on the method of theory based analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2002:113-117). The method of theory based analysis was chosen as the behavioural experiences of the interviewees and their peers were expected to be influenced largely by the cultural theories of behaviour of East Asia.

4 COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM IN THE EAST ASIAN CLASSROOM

4.1 Impressions on collectivistic behaviour

‘Silence is a true friend who never betrays’ –Confucius

The past experiences and impressions of the interviewees on collectivistic behaviour in an East Asian classroom were largely consistent with the theoretical framework. The interviewees reported that the East Asian classrooms they have been to were prominently silent as no one would prefer to be vocal and stand out from the rest of the classroom in fear of being judged or discriminated.

4.1.1 Standing out

In a collective culture, one does not wish to stand out from the rest of the group as it makes one feel uncomfortable even if the individual is more competent than others (Kim and Nam 1998:528). While discussing why there was a great deal of silence in an East Asian classroom, Tanaka shared his views on the subject, as seen in extract 1.

EXTRACT 1

Tanaka: Do you know Japanese proverb ?

"a nail that sticks out gets beaten down" means a person who has outstanding talent will be separated from normal people.

And will get attacked by their neighbors

Because of the talent he or she has

We respect collective action. And rise one hand is individual action.

So we don't like

...

That's why silence is the best way

Silence is maybe 0point but never lose my friend
 Normally
 ...
 I mean silence will never create something
 But never lose something

In extract 1 Tanaka explains the meaning of a Japanese proverb, which aptly summarises collectivistic behaviour in East Asia: Standing out with one's talent could result in one getting rejected by one's peers. Tanaka further states his views on why silence is favoured in the classroom as one cannot gain anything from silence, but one cannot lose anything by practicing silence.

The interviewees' views on other native students who stood out during class were also discussed and predominantly matched the cultural views found in East Asia. Hualing felt that students who stood out from the group did not yet know the cultural rules, while Tanaka thought that overtly vocal behaviour during class was annoying and noisy, and that it made him feel uncomfortable.

The phenomenon found in Kim and Nam's (1998:528) example of a worker lowering his or her effectiveness to save the face of the worker's peers can also be reflected to a classroom situation. A student delivering an overtly effective answer in class can similarly result in the student's peers losing face, and is thus considered immodest behaviour. Both interviewees stated that their answers during class were short and to the point in order to not stand out. They did not, however, feel the need to falsify their answers on purpose for modesty but understood the thought process behind it. In order to not stand out but still deliver an answer when a teacher requests it directly, Hualing described a situation where the effectiveness of the answer could be lowered to appear modest in knowledge, as seen in extract 2.

EXTRACT 2

Hualing: it's like not totally wrong, but not the exact answer
 to show u hv listen to what the teacher said but at the same time not to stand out
 ...
 like if the teacher is asking what do we think about the author wanna express in a passage
 we can always say something similar but not exactly right to the point

In extract 2 Hualing explains that the provided answer to a teacher's question is not exact in order to avoid standing out in class while at the same time showing the teacher that the student has listened. This could be done by providing an answer that is not entirely to the point, but similar to the correct answer. She also further stated that in mathematics one could exclude a step from the middle of the calculation so that the end result would be wrong but

most of the process itself would be correct. In these situations, the hypothetical individualistic approach would be to provide unnecessary additional information with the correct answer. Note that a correct answer in itself (in most cases) is not seen as individualistic behaviour according to the interviewees.

4.1.2 Challenging authority

The Confucian virtue of filial piety, which is defined as being good to one's parents and ancestors, is heavily rooted in East Asian culture (Xin-ming 2008:2). According to Sung (2001:14), elder respect in East Asia also extends to teachers in addition to the elderly in general. When discussing classroom silence with Hualing, she reported that in addition to keeping a low profile, respect for the teacher, in her opinion, also provided a degree of silence in the classroom.

EXTRACT 3

Hualing: will be like okay i am gonna answer it... but i am sort of do it according to the book
so no challenge no further question no discussion
just give the basic simple stuff that they want

...

coz that's the "not-to-challenge-the-authority" rules
if u give extra info, and that the teacher actually dunno abt that at all, u are sort of regarding as dis-
respect to your teacher

...

it depends how old the teacher is and rather they used to study in their own country or have been studied
abroad

local old teacher is a big no
even in university level
coz they also believe experience is everything
and since they are older than u so they are always right
older people always think they are wiser lol

In extract 3 Hualing states her views on challenging authority in Hong Kong. She describes how authority and older age are respected in their culture, and how asking the teacher further difficult questions on a subject can be disrespectful. If the teacher does not know the answer to the presented question, this can be seen as challenging authority by challenging the teacher's knowledge and could even result in the teacher losing face. Hualing further stated that, in her opinion, this respect for the teachers creates more silence in the classroom than the fear of standing out.

4.2 Individualistic behaviour

While the behavioural culture of East Asia is dominantly collectivistic, it does not rule out individualistic behaviour completely. During the interviews, a number of situations were presented where the interviewees felt that they themselves or students around them could, without being judged or discriminated, practice behaviour that could be considered individualistic.

4.2.1 Individualistic behaviour as the norm

It is important to note that silence and modesty themselves as virtues were seen by the interviewees as dependent on the social situation. If raising one's hand was considered acceptable in a particular classroom setting, then raising one's hand was not considered standing out. Hualing expressed that during oral examinations, being vocal was accepted as speaking more and to the point resulted in a better grade. In extract 4 Tanaka describes a classroom situation where raising one's hand was encouraged as it affected the grade of the students.

EXTRACT 4

Tanaka: Coz one teacher in my university said" anybody who rise hand to answer, he or she will get 1points in grade.

And I rose so many times. Hahaha

...

Yes some people rose their hand

I didn't see as standing out

But I didn't see as modest too

Extract 4 shows that Tanaka did not see his behaviour of answering questions voluntarily as standing out, and, at the same time, not entirely modest either. In the classroom Tanaka described, raising one's hand became the norm as the teacher gave the students an incentive in the form of a better grade. The action of raising one's hand was not standing out as other students also did it. As Tanaka did not feel modest, it could be interpreted as individual action, but as other students also raised their hands, it could also be interpreted as collective action.

4.2.2 Individualistic behaviour by elite students

When discussing how standing out was considered improper behaviour, Hualing pointed out that for students, who are considered by their peers and teachers to be elite (talented in some field of practice or subject), it is acceptable for them to stand out in some cases. An elite

student could, for example, answer questions voluntarily, challenge the teacher's answers with his or her own knowledge or be more vocal in general in the classroom, especially in a subject in which the student is considered to be elite. In extract 5 Hualing describes her views on elite students.

EXTRACT 5

Hualing: well they are smart anyway, so they got the right to do that
the thing is, try not to pretend u are smart if you are of average level
most students are of average
only top 5 in the class (random number) hv the "right" to challenge the teacher
ummmm, there are always a few elite student who can answer all the questions and even bring out
further questions
they are usually an isolated group and well respected by the classmates
I⁵: so you respect them too?
Hualing: yes coz they got knowledge to help u get through ur exams
. . . it's strange but it happened to be like the concept of social classes in Europe

In extract 5 Hualing expresses that the elite, in her eyes, have the right to be vocal and to challenge the teacher with further questions as they are intelligent. She stated that an isolated group of elite students is respected by the classmates because they could help one get through future exams. Hualing also compared the concept of elite students to the social classes of Europe.

Hualing, herself, was considered an elite student during her advanced level language classes (equivalent to years twelve and thirteen) due to her prominent talent in languages. When asked if she was more vocal during language classes as opposed to other subjects, she stated that she was indeed more vocal but not by her own accord, as seen in extract 6.

EXTRACT 6

Hualing: i will be if my teachers ask me questions
but generally i dun bother

In extract 6 Hualing states that she would be more vocal in her answer in a language classroom but only if her teacher initiates the question. An important note is that Hualing was only considered to be elite during language classes, and her vocal behaviour during other subjects would not have been met with the same acceptance.

4.2.3 Individualistic behaviour influenced by other cultures and age

According to the interviewees, the cultural behaviour that is expected of them is largely dependent on the people around a particular individual, not the culture itself. Tanaka stated

⁵ I refers to the interviewer

that he felt the behaviour that was expected of him was connected to other Japanese people, and that in a foreign country, for example, the rules of behaviour were different. When asked when Hualing felt comfortable enough to stand out in a classroom, she stated that nationality was a factor, as seen in extract 7.

EXTRACT 7

Hualing: of the class is full of students that are not asians or if the teacher is not asian lol

Hualing describes how she could stand out in a classroom if her peers or teacher was not Asian. This extract supports Tanaka's idea of cultural behaviour being dependent on other people around him rather than the culture itself.

When discussing behaviour as a foreigner, both Tanaka and Hualing reported that their behaviour was different when in a foreign country. In extract 8 Tanaka states that he behaved differently in a Taiwanese classroom as an exchange student, even though Taiwan shares a similar collectivistic culture with Japan.

EXTRACT 8

Tanaka: I talked with so many foreigners (even with girls) and rose my hand

Answers questions

Coz there no japanese around me

So i dont have to consider fucking jap culture. Hahaha

I: You didn't care that they were East Asian?

Tanaka: No man important thing is i was a foreigner in Taiwan

Even we share some parts of culture , situ i am a foreigner to them.

So it s ok

They allow it

Tanaka describes his experiences in a Taiwanese classroom to be more vocal than in Japan. He raised his hand to answer questions and spoke to foreigners because there were no Japanese people around him and he did not have to take Japanese culture into consideration. Even though Taiwan shares a similar collectivistic culture with Japan, Tanaka felt that the Taiwanese students would allow his individualistic behaviour as he was a foreigner in Taiwan.

How one approaches a direct interaction with a teacher also seems to be influenced by the effects of other cultures. When asked if Hualing had ever challenged one of her teachers, she mentioned that her behaviour around her teacher was different when her teacher had studied in America, as we see in extract 9.

EXTRACT 9

Hualing: maybe i hv but my english teacher has studied in america before so she didn't mind being challenge

The influence of another culture can be seen in extract 9 as Hualing explained that her teacher had previously studied in America, and Hualing, therefore, felt comfortable enough to challenge her teacher. She further stated that this was an action she was not comfortable enough to perform with traditional teachers from Hong Kong as, in her opinion, it is considered a taboo to challenge authority.

While discussing when their classroom behaviour included active participation, Hualing mentioned raising her hand more often when she was younger. In extract 10 Tanaka describes the difference between children and adults when it comes to individualistic action in a classroom.

EXTRACT 10

Tanaka: In junior school age or kindergarden age

After i grew up, i dont rise my hand normally

I: Why?

Tanaka: You know i dont want to be standout

And I feel hesitate to rise my hand

But when i was kid, too stupid to feel hesitation

Kids have pure Herat

If they want to rise their hand, they do.

But adult have to consider about others thinking and atmosphere

In extract 10 Tanaka explains that he raised his hand more often when he was younger, as he did not feel hesitation to do so. Tanaka further states that children have “a pure heart” and will raise their hand if they want to, but when one is an adult, one has to consider other people and the atmosphere around you. This would indicate that social situations and cultural norms influence the children’s behaviour less when compared to adults.

5 CONCLUSION

Even though the interviewees’ experiences on classroom behaviour were largely collectivistic, the interview questions managed to reveal several situations where Hualing and Tanaka felt comfortable enough to practice individuality in the classroom without being judged by their peers. The interviewees also managed to elaborate on several external experiences of individualistic behaviour by their peers.

According to the interview, the main factors that contributed to the practice of individuality without being judged were when individuality was done in a collective manner (other students raised their hands also), the cultural rules did not apply to a student (elite students), other cultures influenced the behaviour (teacher having studied abroad) and lack of hesitation or knowledge of the cultural rules as a young student. However, the practice of individuality in an East Asian classroom is most likely a combination of various cultural and social factors and each classroom situation is different, and as such the factors found in the results of the current study cannot be directly applied to a classroom situation and expect individual action to be accepted. The amount and variety of individualism in the results were, nevertheless, unexpectedly high taking into account how dominant the collectivistic culture is in East Asia (Yum 1988).

The current study's data cannot be generalized as it only reported the experiences and thoughts of two East Asian students. Results may vary not only from country to country but also in different regions of an East Asian country. The form of a face-to-face interview instead of a chat-based interview could have also resulted in more vibrant discussions and results.

Future research could focus on acquiring a larger spectrum of individualistic classroom behaviour in East Asia, how it varies from country to country and what is acceptable/unacceptable in some countries. A comparative study could have also revealed the differences between East Asian classroom behaviour and the western world's classroom behaviour in more clear contrast. The teachers' perspective on individualistic classroom behaviour in East Asia could also be an area of further research.

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APPENDIX

Interview questions⁶:

How do the students react when the teacher asks them a question?

Is there a difference in the silence in language classes compared to other subjects?

Do you think active participation in class is important?

Do you think it affects your grade?

If it does affect your grade, are you more active in class discussion?

What do you feel when your teacher asks you a question and expects you to answer? Why?

How do you feel when your teacher asks you a question and your answer is wrong? Why?

What do you think of students who are very active in the discussion in class?

Do you sometimes answer wrong or not so effectively on purpose?

Do you behave differently when you are in another country and are in a classroom?

Can you think of any other situations when you would be allowed to stand out in class?

⁶ As the interview was semi-structured, the appendix only lists the main questions and excludes any follow up questions.