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Understanding Chinese University Students Learning English in China

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According to an Institute of International Education report, since the mid-1980s China has been among the countries sending large numbers of university students to the United States. The report says, "As of 2006/07...67,723 Chinese students were studying on U.S. campuses...Chinese students make up 11.6% of the total international student population in the U.S., and increased 8.2 percent from the previous year" (Laughlin, 2008, p. 5).

Due to lack of English proficiency, many Chinese students begin their academic pursuits in the United States with ESL courses. China and the United States represent distinct Eastern and Western cultural traditions and educational ideologies. Chinese students have learned English as a foreign language and have shaped their learning culture and style from their educational experiences within the Chinese cultural and educational contexts. Thus, Chinese students may face challenges in ESL classes because their perceptions and expectations of the teaching and learning processes differ from those of their American teachers. Therefore, understanding the Chinese cultural and educational influences on Chinese university students will help provide insights into some of the factors that influence Chinese university students' learning of English in the U.S., foster mutual understanding between cultures, and facilitate academic achievement.

Chinese traditional cultural values and educational ideologies are claimed to have important effect on the attitudes and behaviors of Chinese learners (Chen & Hird, 2006; Hu, 2005; Lee, 2004; Li & Yue, 2004; Liu, 2005; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Rao, 2005; Rao, 2006). Special attention has been paid to Chinese university students learning English. Researchers have conducted various empirical studies in an attempt to identify the shared learning strategies of Chinese university students, explore the relationship between their learning strategies and their level of English proficiency (Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005; Rao, 2005; Rao, 2006), investigate the constructs and types of their learning motivation (Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005; Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2004), examine their level of anxiety in learning the language, and study student behaviors in classrooms where communicative-based approaches to learning English are employed (Chen & Hird, 2006; Huang, 2006; Liu, 2005; Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Rao, 2002). Their findings are largely or at least partly attributed to the influence of Chinese cultural and educational context.

Based on these studies, the author will first provide an overview of the characteristics of teaching and learning English in university settings in China, and then present a discussion about how and to what extent Chinese cultural and educational values influence Chinese university students' learning of English. Specifically, their learning strategies, motivation, and behaviors within EFL classrooms that utilize communicative-based approaches to teaching will be addressed. Studies that may suggest a changing Chinese culture of learning are also reported. The author concludes with proposed pedagogical implications and recommendations.

The influence of Chinese cultural and educational values on learning English

Chinese traditional cultural values and English learning

Chinese teaching and learning traditions have been influenced by three sources of Chinese culture: the collectivist cultural orientation of self, socialization for achievement, and obedience to power and authority. The collectivist cultural orientation of self emphasizes the awareness of self in relation to others and social distance between ingroup and outgroup members. Socialization for achievement suggests that individual successes and failures are a reflection of the family and group. Obedience to power and authority advocates self-effacement and respect for superiors (Chen & Hird, 2006; Hu, 2005; Lee, 2004; Li & Yue, 2004; Liu, 2005; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Rao, 2005; Rao, 2006).

Given these cultural values, Chinese learners tend to be particularly sensitive to external evaluation and judgment (Liu & Jackson, 2008). They tend to be highly motivated to achieve goals that are seen as collectively beneficial (Chen et al., 2005; Rao, 2005; Rao, 2006) and they praise diligence and perseverance (Rao, 2005; Rao, 2006; Shi, 2006). As teachers are perceived as figures of authority (Liu, 2005), a student-teacher relationship tends to be "asymmetrical and hierarchical" (Lee, 2004, p. 70). Students generally hide their emotions and consider reticence a virtue (Liu, 2005).

Chinese university students often identify with these ideas of Chinese culture (Liu, 2005). They are well aware that "Chinese don't think in the way most westerners think" (Rao, 2002, p. 94). Take for example Lee's (2004) finding in a study enquiring into

written request strategies in emails written by Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong:

Although politeness and respectable tone is prevalent in requests, the tone seems to indicate that the CLE [Chinese learners of English] are submissive to the implicit power and distance difference between teachers and students. This confirms how Gu (1990) describes politeness in the Chinese culture as a normative value rather than instrumental. The value is still practised in Hong Kong, where people have more exposure to Western culture and were under British rule for nearly 200 years. (p. 69)

Though the influence of Chinese traditional cultural values on teaching and learning is obvious, it is not the only explanation for a Chinese culture of learning. To fully understand the English learning of Chinese university students, Chinese educational context must also be taken into consideration.

Chinese educational context and English learning

China's traditional English language teaching is characterized by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation approach that emphasizes the use of instructional techniques such as repetition, rote memorization, and reviewing. Learning is taken seriously and considered to be an accumulation of knowledge (Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Rao, 2002; Rao, 2005; Rao, 2006).

Furthermore, for Chinese university students, additional educational factors that exert great influence on their English learning include institutional pressure and societal expectations for scoring high marks on exams (Huang, 2006). Specifically, a college English curriculum for undergraduates is usually directed

by China's national College English Syllabus and evaluated by students' results on the CET-4 (College English Test, Band 4, which is designed for non-English majors) and TEM-4 (Test for English Majors, Band 4), which students are required to pass in order to graduate (Huang, 2006; Gao et al., 2004; You, 2003). Likewise, according to Chen et al. (2005), in Taiwan, schools at various levels are also all exam-oriented. This diary extract exemplifies one student's perception of learning and exams:

At present, I am reading the book "know America"...it's so boring that make me not want to read more. But, on the other hand, I got more information about America... Maybe one day an essay about this will appear in examination. Maybe this kind of thought, which is that we learn something just because of certain examinations, is not good guide during the learning process. But, fact is fact! The reality forces us to get a high mark at first. Only when you pass the Band-4 examination successfully, the bachelor's degree will belong to you naturally. (Huang, 2006, pp. 108-109)

As is revealed in this extract, students perceive learning as requisite for passing exams. This type of educational culture that places great weight on exams results in the prevalence of a product-oriented approach to learning and teaching English, where language learning is interwoven with developing test-taking skills. Writing is taught as a skill to write compositions of a three-paragraph format; reading is reduced to skills of memorizing vocabulary, improving reading speed, and locating correct answers to comprehension questions; and addressing students' individual needs for learning English is often neglected (Huang, 2006; You, 2003). Consequently, students tend to be "examination-oriented

learners, short-term passive receivers of knowledge, and pragmatic opportunists for short-cut learning” (Huang, 2006, p.110).

This overview demonstrates that a Chinese conception of teaching and learning is not only rooted in Chinese traditional culture, but also framed within the Chinese educational context. Both cultural and educational factors influence Chinese students’ expectations, attitudes, and values about learning. Studies presented here provide evidence for such influences in the aspects of Chinese students’ learning strategies, motivation, and behaviors in classrooms where English is taught using communicative-based approaches. Each of these aspects will be discussed in greater detail.

Learning strategies

Studies on learning strategies present three major findings. First, Chinese sociocultural and educational contexts have largely determined students’ strategies for learning English. Second, exams play an especially important role in the patterns of students’ strategy use. Third, Chinese university students tend to employ exam-oriented, quantitative learning strategies.

Researchers have argued that English learning strategies of Chinese university students are subject to cultural and educational influences. Nisbet et al. (2005) investigated the relationship between strategies such as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and the English proficiency levels of 168 third-year Chinese students majoring in English. Findings suggest that students’ use of SILL strategies are only minimally correlated with their English proficiency levels. The researchers suggest a number of possible explanations. One is that Chinese cultural and

educational ideologies and practices have influenced students' application of SILL strategies. Another explanation is related to the Chinese practice of emphasizing collectivism. According to Nisbet et al., collectivist values do not encourage learner autonomy, which learning strategies are aimed at developing.

Students in Rao's (2005) study included 20 end-of-2nd year non-English major students at Jiangxi Normal University. Findings reveal that whereas students reported utilizing some SILL strategies infrequently, if at all, they regularly mentioned using strategies that were absent from the SILL. Rao claims that one-third of the SILL strategies that are never mentioned by students are related to communicative competence; the strategies that are frequently mentioned by students but are absent from the SILL are all connected with Chinese cultural and educational context.

This sociocultural and educational explanation for the use of strategies is further evidenced by Huang (2005), specifically in terms of the role of exams. In a diary study on students' perceptions of English learning difficulties and constraints, Huang claims that students' learning difficulties appear to be attributable to their lack of linguistic competence; however, "a closer scrutiny of the classroom discourse seems to reveal that their linguistic difficulties might be a product of the relationship between their linguistic competence and the demands that examinations (e.g. TEM-4) placed on it" (p. 617). Under such circumstances, students prefer quantitative approaches to English learning, such as intensive practice, rote-memorization, and attention to details.

Students' use of exam-oriented, quantitative learning strategies is also found in studies by Rao (2005, 2006) and Gan et al. (2004). Their findings indicate that Chinese university students:

- are highly motivated to score high marks on exams.
- set high goals and strive to achieve them.
- pay more attention to detailed analysis of learning materials than to the development of communicative skills.
- prefer repetition strategies for memorizing vocabulary and texts.
- prefer reviewing strategies for increasing their memory.
- employ rote-memorization techniques to learn vocabulary, texts, paragraphs, etc.

Additionally, Rao (2005, 2006) and Gan et al. (2004) summarize strategies traceable to Chinese cultural values. They claim that Chinese university students:

- are self-directed. They encourage themselves to overcome learning difficulties.
- believe in working hard and have high aspirations for learning English.
- respect teachers' authority.
- rely heavily on teachers for correcting mistakes and problem-solving.

These findings reflect the role of exams in students' development and use of learning strategies. When students view the purpose of learning as a means to score high marks on exams, it is not surprising that they tend to use techniques such as recitation, memorization, and attention to details to learn English. Students would consider these techniques to be instrumental in helping them achieve their goals: score high marks on exams. However, when Chinese students find themselves in a university classroom in the United States, where communication-oriented approaches to learning English are employed, they are faced with

developing alternative learning techniques that will allow them to be successful in the American classroom.

Motivation

Studies on Chinese university students' English learning motivation are mostly based on two forms of motivation. The first is the form of instrumental (extrinsic) motivation which argues that learning English is necessary to pursue practical achievements. Integrative (intrinsic) motivation, which suggests that a desire for cultural integration drives a learner's interest in learning English, is the second form of motivation. Findings not only bring to light the instrumental-oriented characteristics of Chinese university students' English learning motivation, but also identify a range of their motivation types. The role of exams once again attracts research attention concerning motivation. Besides, the relationship between proficiency and taking exams is also examined (Chen et al., 2005; Gao et al., 2004; Liu, 2007; Yang & Nicholas, 2008).

Chinese university students are generally instrumentally motivated. Liu (2007) surveyed 202 third-year non-English majors in a university in southern China and found that students are highly motivated to learn English. They seemed to be more instrumentally rather than integratively motivated. Similarly, Gao et al. (2004) investigated motivation types of 2,278 undergraduate students who were learning English at 30 Chinese universities. Out of the seven motivation types they identified, three were instrumentally oriented.

According to Liu (2007) and Gao et al. (2004), students' most instrumental motivations mainly include seeking job opportunities, promoting their careers, obtaining information, traveling, and

earning good grades on exams. Another common motivation that both studies suggest is the possibility of studying abroad. However, whereas Liu describes it as instrumental, Gao et al. refer to this opportunity to study abroad as functioning as both an instrumental and cultural motivator. Besides, Gao et al. also discover a social responsibility motivation, which the researchers claim is specific to Chinese cultural context. Having been cultivated in a Confucian culture of “harmonizing the family and put[ting] the country in order,” students’ English learning is also driven by the desire to present or promote Chinese culture to the rest of the world (Gao et al., 2004, p. 60).

Research also reveals the important role exams play in influencing students’ motivation. Gao et al.’s (2004) study claims that the most obvious instrumental motivation in their study is the immediate achievement motivation, such as earning high scores on university entrance exams and obtaining academic degrees. Likewise, Chen et al. (2005) formulate in their findings a Chinese Imperative motivator, referring to social expectation of “filial piety, respect for teachers, and excellence in examinations,” and claim that this motivator plays a strong role in motivating Chinese students’ to learn English (p.623). Yang and Nicholas (2008) use a saying that is very popular among Chinese students to illustrate the powerful driving force of exams:

Examinations play a significant role in learning English. ‘*Kao kao kao, laoshi de fabao, fen fen fen, xuesheng de minggen*’ which literally means ‘examinations, examinations and examinations are the formula of a teacher; points, points and points are the lifeline of a student’, reflects a widely-shared understanding of current teaching and learning in China. (p. 150)

The relationships between motivation types and level of English proficiency are also a focus of research. Liu's (2007) and Gao et al.'s (2004) findings appear contradictory in this regard. While Liu argues for a positive relationship between instrumental motivation and proficiency, Gao et al. put forward that the relationship is negative. A closer examination of their studies reveals that whereas in Liu's questionnaire there is no mention of exam or test scores, in Gao et al.'s questionnaire roughly one-sixth of the items reference taking exams, getting good scores, or obtaining certificates. As to this point, Yang and Nicholas's (2008) arguments correspond with Gao et al.'s findings.

In a review of Chinese students' interest in learning English, Yang and Nicholas (2008) argue that Chinese students' low efficacy regardless of high investment in learning English may be explained by the teaching methods that emphasize the importance of exams. According to Yang and Nicholas, as learning for exams is an extrinsic motivation, it acts against intrinsic motivation. If students lose their intrinsic interest in learning English, they may not enjoy learning the language, which consequently may negatively impact their learning outcomes.

This discussion of motivation highlights the relatively more important role of instrumental motivation for Chinese university students. In other words, Chinese university students tend to be highly motivated towards achieving tangible and pragmatic objectives. However, there are potential problems in this regard. Once students' objectives are accomplished, their motivation to learn may decrease. Similarly, when they are in a context different from their previous one, their motivations for learning may change. In this case, it is important that they recognize new motivations.

Behaviors in communicative-based English classrooms

Studies on Chinese university students' behaviors in classrooms using communicative-based approaches to learning English mainly focus on reticence and anxiety of learning a foreign language. Findings not only reveal the causes of reticence and anxiety, but also discuss the relationship between these two factors. Additionally, it is also suggested that Chinese university students may in fact prefer small group collaboration (Chen & Hird, 2006; Liu, 2005; Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Rao, 2002).

Studies indicate that a majority of Chinese university students are willing to interact with peers. Students report having positive attitudes towards engaging in communicative activities. Yet having willingness to communicate does not necessarily lead to the actual participation in communicative activities (Chen & Hird, 2006; Liu, 2005; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Rao, 2002). For example, in Liu's (2005) study, a large number of students remain reticent about participating in class until they are "singled out" (p. 9).

Studies reveal that students' reticence is closely related to their level of anxiety in learning a foreign language. In Liu's (2006) study, 45.4% of the respondents agree with the statement "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class," 41.9% acknowledge the statement "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class," and 51% endorse the statement "I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in the English class" (p.306).

Variables identified to be the causes of students' reticence and anxiety include past educational experience, self-rated level of English proficiency, lack of courage and confidence, as well as

fear of losing “face” (Liu, 2005; Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Rao, 2002). Chinese culture that emphasizes modesty and respect for the elderly and superiors is considered an especially important cause for Chinese university students’ reticence (Liu, 2005). Liu (2005) offers an example from one student who explains why reticence is common among students:

Because Chinese culture tells us to be modest, we often keep quiet and give the chances to others. And Chinese people always seem to be too gentle and too reserved, namely, we like and are good at hiding our emotions. As a result, we often keep quiet if we are going to be put in a different position from others like standing up in front of many people sitting there. In Chinese opinion, the wisest thing for a person is that he shouldn’t show his outstanding abilities even if he has the ability. Chinese people don’t like to show their views in public. Culture is deep in everyone’s mind. It is passed from generation to generation. So in our mind, it is all right to be reticent. It needs a lot of courage to change to be open. (pp. 9-10)

Small group activities are frequently adopted in communicative English classrooms of Chinese universities. Studies have shown that students feel least anxious when engaged in pair work or group work (Liu, 2005; Liu, 2006; Rao, 2002). This may find reasonable explanation in Chen & Hird’s (2006) study which indicates that the students’ cooperation in group work is closely connected with collectivism that characterizes Chinese culture. As one student remarks:

I like pair work best because in the pair work, I can speak more relaxedly and jokingly. What’s more, sometimes if I can’t express my meanings exactly I can use every possible way to express myself. For example, body

language, pictures and so on. So, most time I can finish the work happily. (Liu, 2006, p. 312)

Moreover, the more familiar students are with each other the more they feel at ease in groups (Liu, 2006), and the more likely they are to express their disagreements and challenges. This might be the effect of Chinese preoccupation with “face” protection (Chen & Hird, 2006). However, while Chen and Hird seem positive about the effectiveness of group work in English classrooms in China, Rao (2002; 2005) found in his studies that most students would prefer traditional classroom work to communicative activities. Rao (2005) believes that it is partly attributable to the significant role grammar plays in all examinations.

It seems that Chinese university students’ behaviors in communicative English classrooms are more attributable to Chinese cultural values than to the educational context in China, though there are still traces of the influence of exams. When students arrive in a new country, and are learning to adapt to the new culture, it would be very helpful if the environment in which they study and live is supportive of cultural diversity.

A changing culture for learning English?

Despite the predominant opinions about Chinese university students’ learning of English in China discussed above, some studies present findings that to some extent conflict with these frequent arguments. These findings may suggest that the learning culture of Chinese students is flexible and susceptible to change.

Littlewood (2000) examined students from eight Asian countries and three European countries on their perceptions of the

teacher and knowledge. Results indicate that, compared with students of other countries, Chinese students do not seem more likely to consider the role of the teacher as authoritative and one not to be challenged, to believe knowledge should be passed on by the teacher rather than be explored by themselves, or to expect teachers instead of themselves for evaluating their knowledge. Likewise, in a study surveying 400 Chinese middle-school students about their experiences in learning English, Shi (2006) argues that contemporary Chinese students show little difference from their Western counterparts in terms of attitudes toward learning and student-teacher relationship, while some traditional features still persist. In Shi's study, students were critical of teaching and learning and were willing to challenge the teacher; they were not so concerned about family glory as traditionally expected. Students would welcome more interactive approaches in the classroom to facilitate learning English. While these attitudes contradict the traditionally held Chinese values, students did report valuing diligence and perseverance. Similarly, they did not value holding their own opinions. Findings also suggest that examinations may drive student motivation.

In their study of Chinese university students' collaboration in classroom group work, Chen and Hird (2006) found that apart from harmony and collaboration students also exhibited individualistic characteristics in that they were able to demonstrate disagreement and were willing to challenge each other's ideas.

These findings mentioned above are interpreted by researchers differently. Littlewood (2000) argues for educational influence for explanation, contending that even if Asian students are passive in classrooms as frequently claimed, it is "more likely to be a consequence of the educational contexts that have been or are now

provided for them, than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves" (p.33). Shi (2006) provides a cultural point of view, suggesting that Chinese culture seems to be undergoing shifts from traditional to modern and from Confucianism to individualism. Chen and Hird (2006) argue that the presence of students' individualistic behaviors in group work might be explained by the Western influence on Chinese young generations.

Implications and recommendations

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that the English learning of Chinese university students is more complex than it appears to be. However, based on the evidence provided by the studies presented here, Chinese university students' approach to learning English seems to be characterized by instrumental motivations, the use of quantitative approaches to learning, and reserved participation in communicative English classrooms.

When Chinese students move to a context that is distinct from their home context to pursue academic studies, they will encounter classroom practices that they are unfamiliar with or for which they have not been prepared. These practices may be unfamiliar because students' belief, values, and attitudes concerning teaching and learning are different from those of their teachers. These differences are largely due to the cultural and educational contexts that students have been previously situated in. For example, while an American teacher encourages students to present their opinions before the class, a Chinese student may perceive this activity as a way for the teacher to examine his or her knowledge about the subject matter, and thus the student may worry about how the teacher, who has expert knowledge of the subject matter, is going

to evaluate what he or she says. Therefore, the students may prefer to keep their thoughts to themselves.

Thus, to help students adapt to new cultural and educational contexts, facilitate their participation in classroom activities, and eventually help them achieve satisfactory learning outcomes, it is of critical importance that:

- first and foremost, teachers are aware that a gap exists between Chinese students' perceptions and expectations about teaching and learning English and their own perceptions and expectations.
- teachers understand that Chinese students have had their English learning shaped by their previous educational experiences, home cultures, values, and traditions.
- teachers are sensitive to the characteristics of Chinese students' learning strategies and motivations for learning English.
- teachers understand Chinese students' behaviors in classrooms where communicative-based approaches to teaching English are employed.

Grounded on such awareness, understanding, and sensitivity, concrete measures can be taken by teachers to bridge the gap, and facilitate classroom teaching and learning. Based on the findings from the research reviewed here, some suggestions can be made for teaching and learning English as it relates to Chinese university students:

- Teachers and students should exchange their ideas about each other's cultural traditions and educational ideologies. For example, teachers can ask students to write accounts of their previous educational

experiences and bring them to class for open discussions.

- Teachers and students should discuss the differences in their understandings of teaching and learning styles; analyzing and comparing the advantages and disadvantages of each other's approach to teaching and learning is also recommended.

- Teachers should explicitly convey their expectations to their students. For example, teachers should give students clear objectives for the semester and for each class, so that students are aware of what they are supposed to achieve.

- Teachers can share experiences with students concerning the role of English in each other's lives and work, thus helping students identify objectives that they may be motivated to achieve.

- Classroom activities should involve both Western and Eastern cultural elements. Having the cultural resources to share and contribute can be a strong force to drive student participation.

- Teachers and students should cooperate to construct a supportive learning environment in the classroom. Once learning becomes enjoyable and fun, students' intrinsic motivation is increased and strengthened, and learning is more likely to succeed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, language learning is an extremely complex process. It is further complicated by the cultural and educational

contexts in which students are situated. In this paper, the author has reported findings from studies that focus on Chinese university students learning English within the cultural and educational contexts in China. These studies have mainly examined Chinese university students' learning strategies and motivations for learning English, as well as investigated student behaviors in communicative-based English classrooms.

This research suggests that Chinese university students' learning of English is rooted in Chinese cultural values and shaped by Chinese educational ideologies. When Chinese students come to the United States and start their academic pursuit within ESL classrooms, they may face challenges in adjusting to teaching practices that differ from what they have had in China. Furthermore, they may find that their current practices for learning English are no longer as effective within this new context. To help students adapt to the new cultural and educational context, and eventually achieve academic success, it is of critical importance that ESL teachers in the United States develop an awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to the differences between their teaching practices and the teaching practices in China. Similarly, teachers should be aware of the learning practices Chinese university students employ in learning English. Only on the basis of awareness, understanding, and sensitivity can concrete measures for teaching and learning English operate efficiently and effectively.

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