

# Chinese Cultural Beliefs: Implications for the Chinese Learner of English

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Given the resilience of Confucianism, Chinese students continue to be influenced by their cultural belief systems, which have an effect on their English-second-language (ESL) learning experience in an English-speaking country. This is especially apparent since Chinese students experience the greatest cultural demands in countries with opposing customs and values. The most powerful tenets of Chinese culture are maintaining harmony, collectivity, and hierarchical relationships. These aspects of Chinese culture influence the communication style of the Chinese and their educational system. This article examines five main characteristics of Chinese communication: implicit communication, listening-centeredness, politeness, focus on insiders, and face-saving strategies. The Chinese emphasis on education and academic achievement is discussed in terms of parental influence, environment, effort versus ability, and pedagogy within the Chinese cultural context. Educational implications for Chinese ESL students studying in Canada are also addressed.

*Keywords:* Chinese culture, ESL, Chinese communication, language, culture

## Introduction

The number of adult Chinese students arriving in Canada for the purposes of studying English has increased dramatically over the past decade (Government of Canada, 2015). These students are referred to as sojourners, those who live in another culture for academic pursuits, but may return to their native country in the future. Chinese sojourners face not only acculturation stresses but academic ones as well, such as passing literacy tests/English proficiency tests, and developing oral fluency and accurate pronunciation necessary for clear communication (Dion & Dion, 1996; Minichiello, 2001). Given the magnitude of this Chinese English-second-language (ESL) population, it seems even more pressing to determine and understand some of the most difficult challenges faced by this particular group of students. An understanding of their unique challenges may help inform ESL theory and practice, in terms of both learning and teaching.

Chinese culture has strong historical and traditional ties to Confucian philosophy (Ho, 1994; Weinberg, 1997; Fan, 2000; Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Wang, 2002; Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005; Bond, 2010). It must be noted that other Confucian-influenced cultures exist, such as Taiwanese, Korean, and Japanese. However, this paper focuses on the Chinese culture due to their numbers being the largest with respect to studying in Canada. Given the prevalence and resilience of Confucianism, Chinese students may be more greatly influenced by their cultural belief systems than other groups, such as Europeans. Consequently, I

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surmise that Chinese students are strongly influenced by their cultural beliefs and values under any learning circumstance. In particular, I propose that these Chinese students' cultural beliefs have an even greater influence on their ESL learning experience in a predominantly native English-speaking country. This proposal is based on the assumption that cultural influences will become even more apparent when students' cultural beliefs are quite different from the learning environments' cultural milieu. In fact, Dion and Dion (1996) contend that Chinese students experience the greatest cultural demands in countries with different and opposing customs and values. It is a given that Chinese culture is both complex and vast (Weinberg, 1997; Smith, 2015). Consequently, this paper will focus on the three aspects of Chinese culture that may have the most powerful influence on Chinese students' learning in general and ESL. According to the literature, the most powerful tenets of Chinese culture are harmony, the self in relation to others (collectivity) and hierarchical relationships (Gao, Ting-Toomey & Gudykunst, 1996; Smith, 2015). These fundamental aspects of Chinese culture have greatly influenced the communication style of the Chinese and their educational system. Thus, the first section of this paper will examine the Chinese communication style, and the Chinese emphasis on education and academic achievement. The second part of this paper will then focus on the educational implications for Chinese ESL students studying in Canada.

### Chinese Communication Style

In my view, the communication style that is used by the Chinese will most likely influence their communication style while learning a second language. Consequently, a better understanding of the Chinese communication process will offer insight into the ESL experience of Chinese students. This new insight is crucial since research has indicated that Chinese students perceive difficulties with English-language proficiency to be one of their greatest cultural stresses (Dion & Dion, 1996; Chi, 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). The inability to communicate in the target language impedes students' adjustment to their new living environment. Consequently, adjustment challenges are experienced as a stress that must be handled. First, an understanding of the Chinese communication style must begin with the concept of "self" as it is viewed within this particular culture. The Chinese believe that they are incomplete when viewed simply as individuals; they must be viewed in relation to others. Their value is thus based on their relationship to the whole group, i.e., family/society (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This relational view of the self provides the basis for all components of Chinese communication, which is primarily founded on goals of harmony and hierarchy. In fact, according to Gao et al.,

Harmony is the foundation of Chinese culture. The Chinese term *he* denotes "harmony", "peace", "unity", "kindness", and "amiableness". *He* permeates many aspects of Chinese personal relationships.... The primary functions of communication in Chinese culture are to maintain existing relationships among individuals, to reinforce role and status differences, and to preserve harmony within the group. (1996, p. 283)

For this paper, I have chosen to focus on five main characteristics of Chinese communication: "*hanxu* (implicit communication), *tinghua* (listening-centredness), *keqi* (politeness), *zijiren* (a focus on insiders), and *mianzi* (face-directed communication strategies)" (Gao et al., p. 283).

#### Implicit Communication

With *hanxu*, the Chinese communicate by leaving things unsaid, therefore leaving room for negotiation of meaningful interaction involving interpersonal relationships (Gao et al., 1996). This concept coincides with the

Chinese self in relation to others/the group (Hsu, 1985). Thus, nonverbal communication is emphasized more than the verbal in Chinese communication (Gao et al., 1996; Cheng, 1995). As the Chinese are socialized to control the expression of their emotions, *hanxu* involves the repression of overt feelings. Support for this claim is found in the empirical research conducted by Argyle, Hendersen, Bond, Iizuka, and Contarello, 1986 (Gao et al., 1996), where Hong Kong Chinese were found to have more rules for maintaining control over their feelings than students from those of individualistic cultures. Basically, the Chinese use implicit communication “to reduce their uncertainty about others in personal relationships” (Gao et al., 1996). In addition to implicit nature of Chinese communication, active listening plays a vital role in preserving harmonious relationships.

### **Listening-Centredness**

Given the importance of hierarchy in Chinese culture, the Chinese listener and speaker roles are determined by status and position. Chinese children are socialized to voice their opinion only when they have earned recognition through authority, experience, or expertise. Thus, being an active and avid listener is stressed more than speaking out (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Wang, 2002; Lei, 2003; Huang, 2005). This claim is supported by research conducted by Smith (2015), who studied Taiwanese dinner conversation protocol among the eldest and youngest family members. The children listened while the eldest talked (Gao et al., 1996). Challenging those who are older is considered to be disobedient and disruptive to familial harmony (Cheng, 1999). As with children and parents, students are expected to respectfully listen to their teachers.

Most Chinese schools emphasize listening skills, memorizing skills, writing skills, and reading skills, but rarely give importance to speaking skills. As a result, Chinese children have poor verbal fluency, because assertiveness and eloquence are considered as signs of disrespect. (Gao et al., 1996, p. 286)

The emphasis on listening also extends to work relationships involving employees and their employers. The Chinese believe that active listening prevents misunderstandings and direct conflict, while too much talking can lead to misunderstandings, thus creating conflict that disrupts harmonious communication. This finding is supported by a study that involved Chinese managers ranking oral communication low in importance regarding employment readiness (Gao et al., 1996). As well as being a good listener, it is also necessary to employ polite rituals within any Chinese social interactions.

### **Politeness**

*Keqi* (politeness) is also closely connected to the Chinese concept of self in relation to others. Chinese politeness, involving both modesty and humility, strongly affects guest-host interactions. For example, when offered a drink, the guest is often expected to reply “no” out of respect and politeness, and only accept after subsequent offers (Gao et al., 1996). This claim is supported by research conducted by Stipek, Weiner, and Li in 1989 (Gao et al., 1996), where Chinese participants were found to take less pride in their success, compared to North Americans. As with the predominance of non-verbals, listening in Chinese communication, politeness is also used to help prevent unnecessary conflict in social interactions. Though politeness is emphasized in personal relationships, it is especially necessary when the interaction involves an outside group.

### **The Insider-Outsider Effect**

As with most collectivist cultures, the Chinese give priority to the group over the individual (Gao et al., 1996; Hsu, 1985; Stevenson, 1992; Smith, 2015). Emphasizing the importance of the group, the concepts of *zijiren* (insider) and *wairen* (outsider) greatly determine hierarchically established roles and positions in

Chinese society (Gao et al., 1996). The Chinese will only engage in intimate conversation with someone they know very well, such as a close friend, whereas, interaction with strangers often requires a mediator known by both parties (Gao et al., 1996). Research conducted by Lee & Gudykunst (2001) further supports this claim. Their studies involved a comparison of American and Chinese students' willingness to share emotions. Compared to the American participants, the Chinese stated more willingness to engage in conflict with strangers while maintaining harmony with friends (Gao et al., 1996). For the Chinese, communication differs dramatically, depending on the status of the group being that of the insider or outsider nature. However, face-saving strategies are employed with both insider and outsider groups.

### **Face-Saving Communication Strategies**

The concept of "face-saving" dominates all interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture and is comprised of *lian* (face) and *mianzi* (image). *Lian* is defined as

Something that "represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego's moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for him [or her] to function properly within the community"... [*M*]ianzi, however, stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in [the United States]. (Gao et al., p. 289)

Closely related to the Chinese cultural belief in "face-saving" is the Chinese term *yilun* (to gossip). The Chinese use gossip to express their true feelings, while face-saving as well for both themselves and the object of the gossip. *Yilun* is less likely to happen if one makes peace with others, thus the Chinese are greatly concerned about what others' reactions to them.

As Yu (1990) argues, the concern for what others would say usually creates unbearable pressure on a Chinese, and the fear of being criticized and ridiculed by others has a controlling effect on behaviour. Chinese, for example, are reluctant to reveal negative emotions (Cody, Lee, & Chao, 1989; O'Hair, Cody, Wang, & Chao, 1990). Kleinman and Good (1985) suggest that the Chinese conceal "dysphoria" (depression, sadness, irritability) because it brings shame to self and family. (Gao et al., 1996, p. 298)

The concept of saving face is predominant in most Confucian societies, but seems especially apparent among the Chinese, possibly due to their strong ties to their tradition and culture (Stevenson, 1992; Huang, 2005; Smith, 2015). Since the Chinese preoccupation with saving face permeates their entire life, it is evident that it would play a dominant role in the learning experience of the Chinese student (Juvonen, 2001). Closely related to the Chinese emphasis on face-saving is their need and desire and to comply with others, in order to maintain peaceful relationships.

### **Compliance Strategies**

For the Chinese, complying to save face or "give others face" takes precedence over honesty. Thus, open communication will only take place between insiders and close friends in a one-on-one situation (Zhang et al., 2005). It follows that assertiveness is not encouraged within Chinese communication, for it may threaten the harmony needed for future negotiations. "A basic rule honoured in Chinese culture is 'Honor the hierarchy first, your truth second'" (Gao et al., p. 299). Both compliance strategies and face-saving issues play a great role in Chinese students' perceived need to achieve academically.

The consequences of failure, as well as of success, are similarly magnified by the individuals' identification with their families and the larger society. Just as success enhances the family's status, the consequences of poor performance include not only a loss of status and prestige for the individual, but also a far more critical loss of family "face". The student seeks to avoid at all costs the stigma and shame that would accompany a loss of face. (Stevenson & Lee, p. 134)

It appears evident then that the Chinese communication style, founded upon values of harmony, self-group definition, and face-saving strategies, also affects the academic pressures faced by many Chinese sojourners in Canada. Therefore, in addition to the impact of the Chinese communication process, the Chinese educational system and values will be examined to demonstrate its influence on the Chinese learner. The following sections will include discussions on the importance of education, parental influence, environment, effort versus ability, and pedagogy within the Chinese cultural context.

## **Education and Academic Achievement**

### **Importance of Education**

Many societies believe that education leads to more opportunities for economic and social advancement, however the Chinese place even greater importance on education (Li, 2012 & Li, 2004). For the Chinese, education does not only advance a person intellectually, but morally as well (Gow, Balla, Kember, & Hau, 1996). Furthermore, this cultural belief has been a pervasive presence in Chinese thought for centuries, unlike Western thought (Stevenson & Lee, 1996). In fact, according to an ancient Chinese saying, “Whatever occupation one chose to be, it would not be as honourable as being a learned person” (Stevenson & Lee, p. 133). In fact, Chinese children continue to hold education in high esteem, even though they are well aware of the strict competition that would prevent their educational advancement. Furthermore, compared to American children, Chinese students think more about school life than topics such as movies, games and socializing (Stevenson & Lee, 1996). From the onset, Chinese parents socialize their children to value education and achievement.

### **Parental Influence**

According to research related to the psychological adjustment of Chinese students in both American and Canadian universities, Chinese students experience the greatest culture shock and parental pressure to succeed academically compared to other cultural groups (Dion & Dion, 1996). Interestingly though, despite experiencing the greatest acculturation stress, Chinese students are the most academically successful compared to other groups because of their diligence and attention paid to schoolwork rather than personal problems (Dion & Dion, 1996; Biggs, 2001; Li, 2004). Stevenson and Lee (1996) argue that students’ academic achievement is influenced by their familial, educational, and cultural beliefs. Thus, the study of Chinese cultural influences on their ESL achievement is of particular interest. According to the Chinese, good parenting is the foundation of an enriching learning environment for children. Furthermore, familial piety is such strong force in Confucian cultural, that Chinese children are required by law to take care of their aging parents.

### **The Importance of the Learning Environment**

The Chinese believe that the environment plays the largest role in students’ academic success (Wu, 2005). With a supportive family and school environment, any student can succeed. Thus, the Chinese argue that innate ability is of less importance than effort and environmental influences in a student’s achievement level. “For the Confucians, model emulation was not just one way of learning; it was by far the most efficient way, and one could inculcate any virtuous behavior in people by presenting the right model” (Stevenson & Lee, p. 135).

It must be noted that the Chinese do acknowledge that individual differences exist concerning innate physical and psychological propensities. Regardless, Chinese philosophers claim that instead of viewing these differences as restrictive, they should be seen as impetus to appropriately plan the best education for all

students. For the Chinese, it is the environment that creates differences in students, as opposed to innate ability. According to Confucius teachings, it is “By nature, near together; by practice, far apart” (Stevenson & Lee, p. 135). This cultural belief is relevant because the Chinese are viewed as similar when born, but later the environment has the strongest impact on creating differences among individuals. Given the importance awarded to environmental influences on learning, it is understandable that Chinese parents and children give more credit to effort than ability for obtaining academic success.

### **Effort Versus Ability**

It has already been noted that Chinese students face tremendous parental/societal pressure to achieve in school. Consequently, Chinese students will put forth great effort and spend countless hours doing homework to honour themselves as well as their family. Studies have shown that Chinese parents and students view effort as a greater indicator of success than Americans (Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Li, 2004, Huang, 2005). The importance that is given to effort versus ability is derived from the story of Li Bai, a famous poet from the Tang Dynasty who was lazy throughout his childhood studies. Li Bai watched curiously as a woman was trying to form a needle out of a metal rod.

The old woman explained that “If you are hard-working and persevering enough, a metal rod can be made into a needle”. Li was inspired. From that day on, he studied very hard and became one of the greatest poets in Chinese history. (Hong, 2001, p. 105)

Still today, Chinese students, parents, and teachers stress effort and diligence over ability (Stevenson, 1992). Studies have also shown that Chinese students perceive a positive correlation between effort and ability, whereas Americans do not. “For Chinese students, people working hard have higher ability and those who have high ability must have worked hard” (Hong, p. 109). Further to the point, studies have indicated that students will make another attempt at a failed task, even with the absence of a higher grade or reward (Grant & Dweck, 2001). In addition to parents and children, Chinese teachers also reflect the relationship between effort and ability in their classroom methods.

### **Chinese Pedagogy**

Until children enter the formal school system, such as grade one, they are said to be in the age of innocence. Any teaching that occurs, either at home or at kindergarten, should take an indirect form that focuses on play and discovery, rather than explicit teacher direction (Stevenson, 1992). Parents are especially responsible for teaching their children obedience, self-control, and the ability to develop a strong moral character (Ho, 1994; Wu, 2005). Even throughout elementary school, Chinese pedagogy emphasizes the social and moral development of students, rather than the transmission of knowledge. In fact, Chinese teachers were observed to encourage responses and evaluation from their elementary students, contrary to the Western stereotype of Chinese pedagogy (Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 1996).

Unfortunately, this degree of student involvement that facilitates active learning changes somewhat in junior high school, a great deal in high school and dramatically in university (Stevenson & Lee, 1996). Due to the vast amount of material required to learn for passing strict entrance examinations, teachers must resort to using a teacher-directed approach where students do the best they can do by memorizing and learning new material, leaving little room for creativity (Ho, 1994). However, several studies have now shown that Chinese students do not merely memorize, without understanding, but memorize as a means to understanding (Wu, 2005; Marton, Dall’Allba, & Kun, 1996).

Regrettably, the ESL teaching methodology in China mirrors that which is used for other subjects in the Chinese school system. Even today, most Chinese students are learning ESL through a traditional grammar translation method that emphasizes memorizing grammar rules, reading, and preparing for state English examinations. Having learned English via this type of method, it is understandable that Chinese students would experience great difficulty adjusting to the communicative approach used predominantly throughout Canada. Chinese students not only face the challenge of adapting to an opposing educational system, but a cultural one as well (Cheng & Chang, 1995; Minichiello, 2001; Huang, 2005). The next section of this paper will examine the educational implications for the Chinese ESL learner in Canada, with respect to developing English proficiency and the overall quality of their learning experience (Biggs, 2001). A typical Western ESL classroom experience will be described. Finally, educational implications for the Chinese ESL learner will be considered, with particular focus on their development of oral communication.

### **Educational Implications**

#### **A Typical Western Classroom**

My conceptualization of existing typical Western ESL classroom is based on my experiences and discussions with ESL educators. Given individual variations among teachers and schools, it is important to keep in mind that my description is based primarily on generalities, not on absolutes. In a Western ESL classroom, the desks could be arranged in a horseshoe pattern, or they might be in pairs or groups of four to facilitate face-to-face conversation. There may be visual displays in the Western classroom, as well as learning centres containing authentic English reading/audio materials.

The predominant teaching method used would be the communicative approach, where the ultimate goal is to promote, enhance, and produce meaningful communication among students and their teacher. With the communicative approach, some skill areas are stressed separately when appropriate and necessary. However, for the most part, reading, writing, speaking, and listening would be integrated into the lesson and assignment. Rote memory and out-of-context filling in the blanks exercises would not be pre-dominant in the Western classroom. Grammar would be taught, but within context of other skill areas, stressing real application in both writing and speaking. Collaborative learning may also compliment whole class and individual instruction. Assessment would consist of both formative and summative evaluation, where the process and product are equally stressed. Final grades and formal test scores would not be the sole driving forces and focus of the Western classroom. Students would be evaluated individually, based on their competency, proficiency, and degree of effort/improvement. Group evaluation may also be included in a students' grade.

The Western ESL teacher may move around the classroom, working with individuals or small groups when appropriate. Even while delivering a short lecture based on grammar, for example, the teacher would ask the class questions and invite students to pose questions, while maintaining a student-centred approach. The essence of this student-centred approach would keep the main focus on students' ideas, input, participation, interaction, and concerns. The teacher is not the focus of the learning, but instead acts as a facilitator and moderator throughout class discussions and learning exercises. The Western ESL teacher would not call attention to individuals' errors, but make note of them, and when appropriate, teach a mini-lesson that addresses the students' errors.

The ESL students in a Western classroom would most likely belong to a heterogeneous class with various language backgrounds. Therefore, English would be the language that is most known by all students and thus

represents a common bond between members of the class. The students would be expected to listen carefully to each other and to the teacher when lessons and instructions are given. The students may be asked to repeat the teacher's instructions or what a classmate has said. In a Western ESL class, students sometimes attempt to respond to the teacher's questions, even when unsure of their answer. Students are also expected to freely ask each other and their teacher questions, whenever they need clarification. In a Western classroom, ESL students are invited to question and challenge their teacher, if a difference of opinion exists.

In the Western ESL classroom, students would be encouraged to communicate with native English speakers outside of school, or when a guest speaker is invited to class. Students could access various authentic English videos, books, magazines, and newspapers. ESL students may be required to involve themselves in the English-speaking community to complete certain assignments, such as surveys, interviews, or projects. The community would be involved in the Western classroom, so that ESL students could gain support from their caregivers or friends.

### **The Chinese Learner's Reaction: Pedagogic Implications**

Based on my experiences teaching Chinese ESL students in China and in Canada, I have conceptualized how a Chinese learner may react to the Western ESL environment I have just described. The Chinese ESL learner is used to learning in a classroom where the desks are in straight rows, with few visual displays on classroom walls, if any. Therefore, the Chinese learner may find the interactive structure of the Western classroom too chaotic and thus distracting while learning English. Being aware of the Chinese educational system, the Western teacher could organize the classroom using a combination of both traditional straight rows and interactive horseshoe or grouped desks. This would allow the students to sit where they initially feel the most comfortable.

In addition, if the teacher provides an explanation for the desk arrangement, students may adjust more readily. Without a safe physical learning environment, Chinese students may feel hesitant to take risks to communicate in English. On a positive note, the availability of authentic English materials would be welcomed excitedly by the learners, as it would be a novel experience for them. However, seeing no Chinese translation may intimidate the students. Consequently, the teacher would have to reassure the students that their goal is to derive the general message of the materials, without translating everything word for word.

Chinese students would be most familiar with the grammar-translation method, where memorizing Chinese-English vocabulary, and reading is stressed in China (Gao et al., 1996). Given the emphasis on passing tests, there is little room for the development of creativity in Chinese students. The teacher instructs writing by providing a model essay for the students. The students are then expected to reproduce the essay formula using their topic. The writing process is not stressed and students do not expect a pre-writing stage, where they talk about their essay ideas. Explicitly explaining to the students the benefits of talking about their writing may help convince Chinese students of the relationship between speech and writing. This would help Chinese learners understand the teaching methodologies used by the teacher.

Chinese students would also feel very uncomfortable with the oral communicative method of teaching found in Western classroom. If oral exercises are completed in a traditional Chinese ESL classroom, they involve choral repetition or completing "substitution" exercises. Here set words are substituted within a dialogue. The students do not have to understand the exercise, as comprehension would not be stressed nearly as much as pronunciation. The Chinese learner could easily become confused by learning all four skill areas in



a holistic, communicative manner. Being used to focusing most of their time preparing for state tests (Ho, 1994), Chinese students may feel that the emphasis on oral communication is akin to playing games and a substitute for a knowledgeable and responsible teacher. Collaborative learning and evaluation would also be a foreign experience to Chinese learners. Here again, it is vital that the teacher take ample time explaining and modeling these new methods for the students. Otherwise, the students may simply copy each other's work, for "saving face" takes priority over honesty (Gao et al., 1996). Chinese students may also feel they are wasting their time, and not "really" learning English.

The Chinese learner would expect the teacher to stand at the front of the classroom, without circulating. Seeing the teacher move toward individual students may create discomfort for some, concluding they have done something wrong. The Chinese students would also expect a teacher-directed approach, where the teacher mainly lectures and writes notes on the board (Ho, 1994). Chinese students would expect to passively learn English, through listening and reading instead of oral communication. When invited to express their opinion and challenge the teacher, the Chinese students would remain silent (Cheng, 1999). To question the teacher would be considered disrespectful and it would disrupt the harmony in the class (Gao et al., 1996). Worse yet, if the teacher did not know the answer to a student's question, the student would feel he or she caused the teacher to "lose face" (Gao et al., 1996).

Chinese students would not feel comfortable orally participating in class. Due to the emphasis on implicit communication in Chinese culture, there is little speaking done in Chinese language classes, and in their ESL classes in China (Gao et al., 1996). Seeing the teacher facilitating, rather than lecturing, students may question the teacher's expertise and competency. If the teacher offers positive feedback to students after they have made a mistake, the students would feel the teacher is being dishonest. The Chinese students would think that unless their mistakes are explicitly pointed out, they will learn nothing and not improve their English skills.

When it comes to the expectations Chinese students have of their teachers, it is crucial that Western teachers explain why they are using the methodology they are using. The teacher could role-play different teaching methods to more clearly demonstrate her point, and thus convince the reticent students to give the new approaches a chance. In China, I spent more time justifying my teaching methods and expectations to my students than I did teaching. However, one could argue that my explicit explanations were key components of this particular pedagogic situation. I recall telling my students, "I ask you to do nothing else, but trust me. Try this way of doing things, and halfway through the course, if you do not see yourself improving, we can go back to the methods you are used to". Thankfully, most are not only enjoyed the new methods, but also felt they had learned a lot, despite a great deal of adjustment.

Chinese students are used to relying on Chinese in their English classes in China, since they are used to their classmates speaking Chinese. Often Chinese teachers also lack enough proficiency to confidently teach a lesson using only English. Having classmates from various language backgrounds though may provide greater incentive for Chinese students to use English. However, some Chinese students may cling together out of fear. For beginning language learners, the teacher should allow a safe support system for the Chinese students, where they can use both Chinese and English. Instead of listening silently, Chinese students may whisper translations among themselves because they do not understand the teacher. To a teacher and class unaware of the need for Chinese students to understand everything to feel safe, Chinese learners may appear disinterested and rude. If students are not completely confident that they have the right answer to the teacher's questions, they will

remain silent to “save face”. This can be incorrectly interpreted by the teacher and other students as apathy, shyness, ignorance, incompetence, or disrespect.

Being encouraged to communicate with native English speakers would not be seriously considered as an option for the Chinese students, as the mere thought of it would produce great anxiety. Compared to other countries, China has only recently begun to attract native English speakers and teachers. As a result, Chinese students would have had little contact with native English speakers, especially outside major urban centres. Bringing guest speakers into the classroom would allow the students to “try out” their English in a less threatening environment. Teachers could also role-model survey and interview assignments and have the students interview each other for practice.

Finally, the Chinese students would not be used to parental involvement in the classroom. Parents hold teachers in high esteem in China, and hold tremendous respect for them. To enter the teacher’s classroom would feel very foreign to both Chinese parents and students. Due to the overwhelming parental pressure they face to succeed, Chinese students would probably not welcome their parents into the class (Dion & Dion, 1996). Chinese parents would also expect that if their children are exerting great effort, they should be successful in the classroom (Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Hong, 2001). These Chinese parents would not fully understand the difficulties faced by their children in a Western ESL classroom. Thus, parental presence in the classroom would prove unduly stressful for the Chinese learner.

To ease into this situation, the teacher may have to organize an informal gathering outside the school. Since sharing food plays a dominant role in Chinese culture, a pot luck (this term would have to be explained as it does not exist in Chinese) could be arranged to begin forming relationships with students’ families. Again, the importance of relationships cannot be stressed enough when teaching Chinese students and communicating with their families. Now I will offer some practical tips for the Western ESL teacher.

1. Create a safe, respectful, and welcoming learning environment in the classroom. A sense of humour will also go a long way.

2. Schedule regular meeting times with students to discuss their concerns and fears. Some students may wish to have a third party accompany them, to alleviate discomfort caused by discussing personal issues with their teacher. These meetings will help build relationships that are so important to the Chinese learner.

3. Hold regular informal gathering for students and their families. Sharing food at these gatherings provides a strong communal bond.

4. Design learning activities and role-plays that incorporate cultural awareness content.

5. Have students present (in groups if they prefer) a written or oral discussion about the educational system/cultural practices in their native country. Understand that creativity for Chinese students is something that was never stressed in their previous education. A great deal of patience, perseverance, and innovative teaching methods may help develop their creativity.

6. Create a mentoring system, where students are paired with more experienced ESL learners or native-English speaking students.

7. Encourage students to write out or draw their ideas before using them in oral communication. Teach learning strategies that will build confidence in students who struggle with oral fluency.

8. Educate the class on cultural variations of non-verbal, implicit communication.

9. Invite students to provide feedback on learning activities with which they are unfamiliar.

10. Enlist the help of other professionals (Cross-cultural Learning Centres) and keep abreast of current ESL theory/practice.

### Conclusion

To summarize, research has shown that Chinese communication style, familial/societal relationships, and educational values can have a powerful impact on Chinese ESL learners in a Western classroom. It must be cautioned however, that while research has provided some significant insights into the understanding of Chinese cultural beliefs/values, one cannot generalize to all Chinese learners. Given the economic, political, and cultural diversity within the Chinese population, further research is needed to examine culture's impact on a wide cross-section of Chinese learners. The expectations Chinese students brought to the ESL classroom are often in direct opposition to the communicative teaching approach of Western teachers. Again, variations do exist among Western ESL teachers and classroom environments.

Many curriculum documents contain oral fluency and social/cultural competence objectives. However, these documents do not include guidelines that explain *how* ESL teachers can implement the curriculum and meet the stated objectives. These teachers are given no suggestions for meeting the needs of their culturally diverse classroom. Consequently, curriculum documents look impressive in theory, but in practice their stated objectives are difficult to achieve. Meeting the social/cultural needs of ESL students is unlikely, if left to the goodwill and conscience of ESL and classroom teachers. Therefore, it is apparent that more research is needed to develop workshops that inform the ESL teaching profession. These professional workshops should focus on bridging the gap between the diverse cultural learning expectations of students and Western ESL practice. A great deal of work remains to be done in the field of ESL education.

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