

Preparedness of Chinese Students for American Culture and Communicating in English

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Abstract

What Chinese students learn about American culture and the English language in the classrooms of China does not adequately prepare them for the reality of American culture and communication in English. In this study, the constructs of American culture and models of English language taught in Chinese classrooms are compared with the reality of American culture and English communication, as experienced by eight undergraduate students from China. The students visited the United States for the first time to observe American culture and university classes in four cities with plans to return for graduate studies. In light of their experiences, findings revealed that Chinese students may often be unprepared for the challenges they will face associated with cultural dissimilarities and communicating in the English language.

Keywords: American culture, English communication, international education, study abroad

Attending college in the United States (U.S.) is a career preparation goal for numerous students in China, and, for many of them, that goal has become a reality. According to the *Open Doors Report 2011* issued by the Institute of International Education (IIE) (2011), 157,558 Chinese students attended school in the U.S. during the 2010-2011 school year, an increase of over 23 percent from the previous year. These numbers describe China as the number one source of international students in the U.S. during 2010-2011. When Chinese students enter the U.S., they are often unprepared for the challenges or difficulties they will face associated with cultural dissimilarities and communication. Hostede (2005) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another” (p. 4). While Chinese students are taught about American culture in Chinese classrooms, a greater focus is placed on the English language. However, American culture and English taught in Chinese classrooms may not fully prepare students for the reality of American culture and English communication in the U.S.

Many research studies discuss the focus of Chinese education upon the learning of English, as well as the challenges faced by international Chinese students attending school in the U.S. However, the

literature is sparse concerning Chinese students’ expectations and perceptions of American culture based upon the constructs of American culture as they were taught in the classrooms of China. In order to address this gap, we conducted a focus group and interviews with eight undergraduate Chinese students to explore the reality of their experiences with American culture during their first visit to the U.S., compared to their previous expectations and perceptions of America based upon the constructs they were taught in Chinese classrooms. The Chinese students came to America for four weeks to observe American culture and university classes in four cities with plans of returning to the U.S. for graduate studies. In this study, we examined the following research questions: (1) how do the constructs of American culture as taught in Chinese classrooms compare with the reality of American culture experienced by students from China; and (2) how well did the English language model taught in Chinese classrooms prepare students from China for English communication in the U.S.

Attraction of an American Education

For the most part, the majority of students coming from China are undergraduates who realize that earning a college degree in China today does not necessarily



ensure a comfortable standard of living (Fischer, 2010). Consequently, they seek a degree from a school in the U.S. because of the prestige and reputation it carries (Lin, 2010). In an article published in *U.S.-China Today*, Lin (2010) interviewed Wang Huiyao, Director of the Center for China and Globalization, who identified a number of potential reasons or enabling factors for the increase of Chinese students traveling west to earn a college degree. Those reasons or enabling factors included:

1. Studying abroad provides students with an opportunity to be educated for a globalized market.
2. More Chinese have the funds for education than ever before because of a rising middle class in China.
3. Some Chinese view education in China as inflexible and out-of-date, thereby limiting creativity.
4. Pursuing a degree outside China may forge a path for immigration and an opportunity for a better lifestyle.

Lin (2010) reported that it is not only an earned degree from the U.S. that makes Chinese graduates more marketable, but the skills they learned through the experience abroad. Through the international experience, they learn to communicate in a global environment, making them more valuable to multinational corporations. This often results in their earning salaries two to five times higher than graduates from Chinese universities.

Whatever the underlying reasons for Chinese students deciding to attend school in the U.S., they will be confronted with challenges in the wake of cultural dissimilarities. The paradigm shift from the Chinese learning environment to the U.S. learning environment can result in social, language, and academic difficulties for the Chinese students (Sun & Chen, 1997; Wan, 2001; Zhang & Xu, 2007a; Zhang & Xu, 2007b). In order for Chinese students to become successful learners in American universities, both instructors and the Chinese students themselves must endeavor to learn from one another. Discovering Chinese culture and new perspectives from Chinese students may help instructors to expand existing educational practices in ways that enhance learning and educational success for Chinese students. Instructors should remember that learning is reciprocal and they have an opportunity to not only impart knowledge, but also learn from students (Ryan, 2005). When instructors and Chinese students learn from each other, discrimination, as reported by many Chinese students studying in the U.S., may be reduced (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). When instructors seek to understand international students'

culture and educational background, they model inclusiveness and acceptance for all students.

Cultural Challenges

Studies have found that international students' adjustment to learning abroad is dependent upon how analogous the culture of the students' home country is to the culture of the country where they attend school (Chen, 1996; Sue & Zane, 1985; Sun & Chen, 1997). Chinese culture and American culture is very dissimilar, and many differences exist between the learning and teaching environments of the two. Problems arise when an instructor and student originate from different cultures. In China, students are encouraged to engage in collectivist behavior, while American culture traditionally stresses independence and self-assurance (Wan, 2001). These cultural differences can stimulate feelings of confusion and uncertainty for Chinese students. However, there are ways in which instructors can help international students adapt to western classrooms. Ryan (2005) suggested that instructors who are aware of differences between stated course objectives and what students actually learned tend to be more yielding, contemplative, and willing to adapt their teaching methodologies to various learning styles. Such teaching practices may result in a classroom environment that promotes diversity and encourages student participation, leading to higher levels of learning.

According to Mijares (2009), American culture is a focus in many Chinese classrooms. Mijares (2009), an educator herself, visited China and spoke with elementary teachers and students about their knowledge and perceptions of American culture. Chinese elementary teachers indicated students are encouraged to watch American television, and many students give themselves English names in addition to their Chinese names. However, as students enter high school, the concentration of their education turns to a career focus. In Chinese schools, there seems to be a higher focus upon learning the English language than upon American culture itself.

Communication Challenges

A contributing factor to feelings of isolation and loneliness is communication issues, or difficulties conversing with others related to Limited English Proficiency (LEP). Chinese students may feel misunderstood because of LEP and, as a result, they

often segregate themselves from American students (McCormack, 1998; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Discrimination experienced by Chinese students can also lead to self-segregation as reported in a study by McCormack (1998). Chinese students often perceive or experience discrimination because of their LEP or because they speak with an accent and clearly belong to an ethnic culture (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

According to Mijares (2009), English is a required subject beginning in second grade continuing through postsecondary education (Lam, 2007), as students must become proficient in order to excel in the academic system. The English class is the principal location in which students learn English; it is seldom incorporated into other classes or within the home (Hu, Feng, & Luo, 1994). Besides the classroom, students often gather to learn and practice English at the “English Corner,” a trendy student activity at the postsecondary level (Gao, 2007; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). The chosen English language model in Chinese classrooms is often Standard English, such as General American or Received Pronunciation enhanced with relevant, appropriate elements of “China English” (He & Li, 2009) “China English” is defined by He and Li (2009) as:

. . . having standard Englishes as its core but is colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics, and which is particularly suited for expressing content ideas specific to Chinese culture through such means as transliteration and loan translation. (p. 83)

Given the observation that China has the highest number of residents learning English worldwide (Crystal, 2008), “it has been projected that ‘China English’ may soon have more speakers than speakers of English in the UK and USA combined; if that happens, ‘China English’ may exert considerable influence on the further development of the English language” (He & Li, 2009, p. 70). This may cause further communication challenges for Chinese students attending western schools for postsecondary education.

Many students in China are highly motivated to learn English because of rapid globalization, defined by Korpi and Tahlin (2006, p. 145) as “growth in international trade, capital mobility, and labor migration,” and the fast-growing economy in China. However, teachers and students face difficulties teaching and learning English because of a deficiency

of resources and limited opportunities to hear and practice with native speakers (Liu, 2005). Motivation to learn English is high among students in China who have the desire and resources to study abroad because they consciously plan to put it into practice.

Literature Review

Since the early 1980s, the number of students from China studying in the United States has steadily increased and Chinese students are now one of the largest groups among international students (Institute of International Education, 2011; Tang, 2009; Zhang & Xu, 2007a; Zhang & Xu, 2007b). Students from China come to the U.S. in hopes of earning a western degree that may lead to a higher standard of living; however, they face challenges in adapting to a culture that is very different from their own (Sun & Chen, 1997; Wan, 2001; Zhang & Xu, 2007a). One of the greatest challenges that can affect adaptation to the host culture, particularly the teaching and learning environment in the host country, is a low level of English proficiency (Han, 2007; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

Cultural Differences

Chinese students often have difficulties in assimilating and adjusting to their new environment (Chen, 1996; Sue & Zane, 1985; Sun & Chen, 1997). This is due primarily to culture shock, which results from uncertainty regarding the norms of the host culture (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Students may feel uncertain about how to respond to or conduct themselves in various situations, causing them to feel inadequate, misunderstood, and dejected (Zang & Xu, 2007b). A side effect of culture shock is homesickness or a yearning for familiar surroundings. Homesickness can cause students to feel lonely, depressed, and alienated (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Tognoli (2003) found that students who felt homesick scored lower on self-esteem assessments than those students who did not experience homesickness. In a study by Chataway and Berry (1989), Chinese students experienced higher degrees of culture shock, homesickness, stress, and poorer mental and physical health compared to other international students. The researchers also found that Chinese students interacted less with students in the host country than did other international students. Students who are able to adapt and enjoy interaction within the host society tended to have more positive educational and social experiences (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986).



Classroom Differences

According to Hofstede (2005), challenges for international students in American schools arise when students and instructors come from different cultures. Those cultures represent different value systems that affect the student instructor relationship. Hofstede (2005) concluded that education in China is characterized by a large power distance in which instructors are esteemed; the learning environment is teacher-centered, formal, and structured, allowing for little teacher-student interaction (Wan, 2001). In contrast, the American educational setting has a smaller power distance and tends to be more student-centered (Hofstede, 2005); students are encouraged to express their thoughts and ideas while interacting with the instructor (Wan, 2001). Chinese students view the instructor as the authority figure in the classroom and feel that American students who interact with the instructor are daring (Zhang & Xu, 2007a).

Andrade (2006) reported that professors in one American university thought that the main challenge facing international students is limited English proficiency, which often results in poor academic performance and occasionally necessitates the instructor's individualized attention. The English models taught in Chinese classrooms stress the written form over the spoken form (Wan, 2001), resulting in limited verbal proficiency. Lower-level English proficiency can hinder participation in class discussions and, as a result, reduce learning and comprehension (Han, 2007).

In a study by Zhang and Xu (2007a), researchers interviewed 11 Chinese students at four different phases during their semester at an American university. Based on survey data, researchers reported that the students found the teaching and learning environment to be very different from China. While all of the Chinese students were generally successful during the semester, students reported they remained silent in class because of their limited English proficiency; they feared the embarrassment of making a mistake (Jacob and Greggo, 2001; Zang & Xu, 2007b). The students were not accustomed to receiving a course syllabus and did not recognize the importance of the information it contained. They described their Chinese professors as instructors who made decisions about the course as the semester progressed.

Wan (2001) reported similar findings from in-depth interviews with a Chinese married couple who were studying for graduate degrees at an American university. Both the husband and wife felt that, while

their Test of English as a Second Language (TOEFL) scores were good, they experienced difficulty in communicating in English, as the English spoken in America was very different from the English they learned in China (Wan, 2001). They described Chinese classrooms as very formal and inflexible as compared to American classrooms.

In order to achieve academic success and experience positive social interaction, Chinese students must adapt to the culture of the host country and the new teaching and learning environment (Sam, 2001; Zhang & Xu, 2001b). When adaptation is unsuccessful, some Chinese students experience disillusionment with America when it differs from their anticipations (Wan 2001). A visit to the U.S. prior to entering school may help students from China adapt more quickly and to feel better prepared for future cultural and academic experiences. Abe, Talbot, and Geelhoed (1998) found that:

Students with previous experience in the United States were better equipped to handle the institutional and societal demands of campus life and developed stronger bonds with the university they were attending. Students with higher scores may have had previous opportunities to learn how to navigate the U.S. educational system, develop stronger language skills, and become more comfortable with cultural norms different than their own. (p. 545).

Spending free time with Americans can also help Chinese students adapt more quickly and improve their English speaking skills (Surdam & Collins, 1984). Furthermore, university orientation programs for international students can also improve adaptation by addressing useful information about housing, communication, and the American educational system (Althen & National Association, 1990).

Conclusion for Previous Studies

The research framework provides important facets of the academic and social adaptations faced by students from China who attend American universities. Many studies that examined Chinese students' perceptions and attitudes toward American culture have done so at some level during the students' academic experience in the U.S. There are also various studies that have investigated patterns of English usage among Chinese students. However, there are limited numbers of studies

that have examined how the constructs of American culture as taught in Chinese classrooms compare with the reality of American culture as experienced by students from China. Research is also limited regarding how English models taught in China prepare students for communicating within the American culture. Thus, this study will bridge the gap in the literature by examining two guiding questions: 1) how do the constructs of American culture as taught in Chinese classrooms compare with the reality of American culture experienced by students from China; and (2) how well do the models of English taught in Chinese classrooms prepare students from China for English communication in the U.S.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to investigate how the theory of American culture as taught in Chinese classrooms compares to the reality of American culture experienced by non-immigrant, undergraduate Chinese students during their first visit to the U.S. A qualitative case study design was selected for this research as it best allowed participants' voices to be heard (Tellis, 1997). Through case study research methodology, researchers are provided with a way to examine subject matter or action within a particular window of time, allowing for presentation of rich narrative necessary for facilitation of evaluative exchange (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants

The participants in this study were eight Chinese undergraduate students visiting the U.S. for the first time to observe American culture and university classrooms. The students observed such classrooms in New York, Washington, D.C., Boston, and Cincinnati. During the four week visit, they participated in several non-credit courses at a sampling of the universities on the topics money and banking, American culture, and international finance. All eight students were enrolled in a Chinese university, and seven expressed a desire and hope to return to the U.S. for graduate school.

This case study was conducted through a Chinese American Association, based in a major Midwestern city that assists Chinese students who wish to attend school in the U.S. The study focused on the following research questions: 1) how do the constructs of American culture as taught in Chinese classrooms compare with the reality of American culture as experienced by non-immigrant Chinese students?; and

2) how well did the English language model taught in Chinese classrooms prepare students from China for English communication in the U.S.

In order to investigate these questions, we purposefully sampled (Gilbert, 2008) all eight Chinese students. Purposeful sampling provided a way to gain insight and understanding by hearing from those within the population of interest as they were members of the group who participated in the visit to the U.S. The population of interest is undergraduate Chinese students entering the U.S. for the first time to attend school.

Data were collected through interviews and a focus group. Creswell's (2009) structure was used to guide the organization of this study as it "advances a framework, a process, and compositional approach" to research (p. xix). A 10 question, open-ended interview schedule was developed and conducted in a face-to-face setting with each Chinese student. All eight Chinese students volunteered to participate in the focus group and to be interviewed. Both the focus group and the interviews were conducted face-to-face in English and digitally recorded. One researcher, who is fluent in both Chinese and English, also served to translate as needed. The data provided a snapshot in time of both the Chinese students' perceptions after two weeks and after four weeks in the U.S. The data also provided insight into how the students perceived their visit might impact their return to the U.S. for graduate school.

Using a focus group schedule containing eight open-ended questions, we acted as medium-level moderators (Gilbert, 2008) to conduct the focus group for which all eight students volunteered to attend. Thus, as medium-level moderators, we guided the discussion and, when needed, interposed probing questions to uncover deeper insight and information. In order to ensure validity of the instrument, during the focus group, we used member checking techniques by restating our understanding back to the participants so they could confirm the reliability of our interpretations (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The focus group was conducted in a relaxed, informal setting and lasted for one hour. The focus group dialogue was recorded and transcribed.

Interviews were also conducted in a relaxed, informal setting. The duration of each interview was approximately 15 minutes. As with the focus group schedule, in order to ensure validity of the survey instrument, during the interviews the researchers used member checking techniques. Receiving agreement from participants that our interpretations accurately



captured their verbal thoughts and perceptions helped to establish the authenticity of the study.

In this research, triangulation of the data occurred in three ways: interviews, a focus group, and member checking. For the interview component, all eight students voluntarily participated and responded to the survey instrument we developed. The focus group was conducted with all eight students, and member checking was performed throughout the dialogue of both the interviews and focus group.

Analysis and Results

The open-ended survey and focus group questions allowed the Chinese students to convey their perceptions about American culture and communicating in English while in the U.S. All eight students participated in the focus group session and interview. Analyses began by compiling a complete transcript of the focus group dialogue and interview responses. Next, using an inductive process, the transcripts were thoroughly read and reviewed to gain an understanding of the overall ideas the participants had conveyed. Coding was ongoing and completed by hand with color highlighters used to denote key words and phrases. Open coded data was then reviewed to identify related categories and patterns (Creswell, 2009). To ensure interrater reliability, two qualified coders at the postsecondary level reviewed the transcripts. The following themes emerged from the focus group and interview data: (a) preparedness for American culture; and (b) communicating in English.

Preparedness for American Culture

There is little research about how American culture is described and taught within the classrooms of China. Chinese teachers encourage students to watch American television to learn about American culture (Mijares, 2009) and to read American books, but the Internet is not a source for information about other cultures, because it is censored by the Chinese government (Deibert & Villeneuve, 2005). As a result, students from China are often unprepared for and surprised about American culture when visiting the U.S. When asked, “Compare American culture as you were taught in China with the American culture you experienced,” students spoke candidly about their perceptions and reactions to American culture. Some students were surprised by the differences between the realities of American culture versus what they learned in China. A comment from students seemed to center

around their surprise at the openness of Americans. “I have learned that America is open. The people here are very open and outgoing and there are lots of people here from all over the world. When I come I think it is just like what I learned.” The students defined “open” as “talkative” and “approachable.” During their four week visit, the students had conversational access to university instructors, American and other international students. They were also taken to shopping malls and fast-food restaurants where they had many opportunities to observe and engage in conversations with Americans. One student indicated she “learned a little about American culture in China, that Americans are very open and friendly.” However, she noted while she was in the U.S. that “Americans are very friendly, but not very open.” From watching American movies in China, she “thought that Americans preferred to go out with friends instead of being with family. But while here, I observed that Americans liked to be with their families.” A different student echoed, “Some Chinese think Americans are too open, but I think it is not true. I can’t imagine when I was in China that American people are so nice.”

During the focus group session, students indicated, “We learned about American history and English” but were again surprised by what they observed while in the U.S. as compared to what they learned about American history in China. The students visited four U.S. cities: New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., and Cincinnati. During their stay in each city, they learned about its history and enjoyed taking tours. Based on their comments about American history, they observed that America boasts a richer history than they first perceived, as described by one student who shared, “I learned in China America is a very young country and doesn’t have a long history. I thought it was simple, but when I got here I think there are a lot of antiques, more than I thought. It has a long history too.”

In order to learn about American culture and English communication, Chinese students are encouraged by teachers to watch American TV shows and movies. One student explained, “I did not know much about American culture before I came here. I only got information about America from the TV or movies. Maybe it was similar because it is American people who act in the movie.” However, not all the students referenced American TV shows as a source for learning about American culture. In general, opinions about American culture varied in regard to how much they had learned about American culture in China. One

student had little idea at all about what to expect from a visit to the U.S.: “I don’t know what American life is like before I come here.” According to another student, the knowledge she gained about America in China was focused on learning English rather than learning about American culture: “I learned English in China, but not details about American culture.” As might be expected, American culture seemed to be addressed in Chinese classrooms on a broad, general scale, and students were surprised about the specifics of American culture, as one of the students explained:

I always chat with them (Americans); I never imagine American people drink water with ice and wash hands with hot water. In China it is opposite. Because I think I’m a person who usually focuses on some little things, details, the details can surprise me, can shock me. I think we are taught more broadly, but not about specifics.

Another student believed that there were some similarities between the American culture they observed and experienced as compared to what they learned in China. “It is pretty similar, but sometimes things are not what we learned. I think it is relaxed and busier than China.”

In addition to experiencing the differences in American culture as taught in Chinese classrooms and the reality of American culture, students also discussed how their education in China prepared them for American culture. When asked, “How well did your education in China prepare you for American culture as you encountered it?” students described their education in China as compared to what they observed in America. Based on students’ responses, how well their education in China prepared them for American culture varied from classroom to classroom. Most of the students felt their education in China did not prepare them for the realities of American culture. In response to the question, one student explained:

Maybe on some level what I learned in China was very similar, but it depends on the teacher. While I was in America I met teachers. They were very good at motivating all students to learn. I learned about international finance and American culture.

There seems to be something missing in the Chinese classrooms when it comes to teaching about American culture. “It did not prepare me very well,” a student expressed honestly. “I had to come and learn here.”

However, a different student thought that the education she received in China “gives a lot of practice and if you can know it, maybe you can prepare.” When asked, “What type of instruction could be included in Chinese curriculum to bridge the gap between theories of American culture and reality of American culture?” students suggested a variety of ideas and gave several examples, such as: “I think maybe in Chinese college, maybe some professor could have us as a team to give a presentation in class about what we learned in America. We are the first group from my college to visit America.” In thinking about reporting back to her instructors in China, a student suggested that, “Maybe I will say that America is different from what you think. But if you stayed here longer what your teacher taught you may be true.” In comparing study skills among Chinese and American students, one student was surprised by what she observed:

I think maybe I will tell my teachers and classmates and friends that American students also work hard, study hard...Because in China I think some students like me, before think American students are happier, have more freedom, and are more relaxed. But, we really ignore that students have to study whether in China or America. It is our work at this time. I think it is really good for me to see that American students also study hard so I’m not lazy anymore.

Two students compared Chinese instructors to American instructors, and noted differences: “The teacher in China always teaches of the knowledge from the books and utilizes examples and body language. Here, the teacher used interesting examples to help us understand what he was teaching.” After attending a course at one of the American universities, another student described an experience during which the American finance instructor asked the student to first work through the problem on his own. This instructor’s approach was different than those to which the student was accustomed to in China. The student described the experience:

I asked my professor at [American university] to show some actual numbers in the formula, to tell us how it works. He asked me to do it first and the next day he would ask me if I had done it. If I had already done it, he will tell me how it works. I think it is not as hard as I thought before. Maybe in China teachers teach us a lot of things so they



cannot just leave us to do the job.

Based on their responses, students recognized that gaps exist between what is taught about American culture in Chinese classrooms and the reality of American culture they experienced. Although their visit to the U.S. was only four weeks, after visiting and gaining exposure to American culture, the students felt better prepared to return for graduate school in the U.S.

Preparedness for English Communication in the United States

In an increasingly globalized world, the pressure upon students in China to learn English is mounting. Many students seek ways to practice and enhance their English-speaking skills. Students in China begin learning English as early as second grade and continue through the university level. The chosen English language model in Chinese classrooms is often Standard English, such as General American or Received Pronunciation enhanced with relevant, appropriate elements of “China English” (defined earlier under Language Challenges) (He & Li, 2009). Of all eight students interviewed for this study, four were taught English using the American English language model and four were taught using an American-British mixed model. When asked to “describe the differences and similarities between the English language model you were taught in China and the actual English language used in America,” students responded with varied reactions. All of the students believed learning English was very important in order to converse with others in America. One student remarked, “I learned the language and how to speak – how to communicate so I won’t be lost.” Based on students’ responses, learning English in China seemed to focus on common, basic words and phrases. In preparation for the trip to the U.S, one student worried about her English skills and explained “When I just think about coming here I don’t think it is a tough thing, but I worried about my English because I’m not very confident about it.” She further elaborated, “I think it is so different because we just learn some dialogues in China like ‘nice to meet you,’ ‘fine,’ ‘thank you.’ But in America, I know that there are some different answers to the same question.”

The students believed that the English they were taught in China was helpful, but did not fully prepare them for communicating in English in the U.S. Some believed that English communication in the U.S. was easier than expected. One student described her

experience: “In China, you were taught strict boundaries for what is right and wrong. It is easier to understand in America. The English I learned in China did help, but I learned more in America.” While in the U.S., students realized they could shorten some of the formal English phrases they learned in China without changing the meaning. A student compared learning formal English in China to taking exams as compared to more informal conversational English in America. “We learn English in school for examination and I think chatting maybe less formal. So, I think it is different like maybe in school we learn ‘are you hungry?’ But now, we just say ‘hungry?’” Again while finding some similarity between what she learned in China and what she experienced in the U.S., a student explained there was a difference in pronunciation:

It is quite similar, but not just like our teacher said. The tiny pronunciation is different. It is not important to just focus on this, but when you grasp it, maybe you will be more native. Sometimes when you say a word with *m* and *n*, it is different.

During the focus group, two students discussed their observations of English spoken in American television shows and movies and compared them to English communications in the U.S. “I think it is similar because in China we also see some American film or movies, or soap operas so I think it is similar.” The other student responded, “I just listen to the English from TV shows and teachers and I think the teachers speak more slowly and people here speak fast. Sometimes I can only get the main point. Sometimes I ask my teacher to speak more slowly.” Another difference in the English they learned in China as compared to spoken English in the U.S. was the different accents they heard. In China, students mainly heard their Chinese teacher whom they indicated focused on grammar. One student suggested, “Maybe we learn English in China with a Chinese accent because our teacher is often Chinese. She further explained, “We always think what we learn in China is more like the real English, but when we go to America why are there different accents?” During an interview, a student explained that Chinese teachers focus on the use of correct grammar when learning English in the Chinese classroom:

Maybe I learned English in China it was more about the grammar. I must speak English as a whole sentence in the right tense. In our examination the questions is always about the grammar.

She added, “Whatever I said to the people here they can understand me.”

Overall, these comments expressed a variety of opinions about the similarities and differences in the English models the students were taught in China and what they experienced during their visit to the U.S. While the students recognized the English they learned in China was helpful, it did not fully prepare them for English communication in the U.S. It is important that American instructors recognize Chinese students in their classroom may have different levels of English-speaking skills and experiences and exposures to various English models. Their instruction should be designed to take into account this variability in order for Chinese students to understand their expectations and course materials.

Lee and Rice (2007) suggested that American postsecondary institutions communicate to faculty and staff guiding principles for teaching and working with international students. They further posited that it should be made clear that international students may have “different perceptions of the faculty-student relationship, may respond in different ways than do U.S. students, and may feel that authority figures are beyond reproach” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 406). Instructors should seek to create a classroom atmosphere that is welcoming and inclusive. They should also become acquainted with all of their students to discover individual needs and learning styles. International students require patience and understanding from their instructors and classmates.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

Attending school abroad is exciting, but can also be unsettling, especially for Chinese international students in the U.S. Research shows that cultural and learning environments are very different between China and the U.S., and as a result Chinese students often face difficulties adapting to their new settings. The difficulties faced in the academic setting are primarily the result of LEP and differences between American and Chinese teaching methodologies and learning styles. Chinese students are often met with the difficulty of adjusting to their new environment, and culture shock can leave students with feelings of loneliness and isolation. They are not fully prepared for the reality of American culture and the English proficiency needed to feel acclimated to their new environment.

Although students in China learn about

American culture in the classroom, results of this study reveal that students from China experienced differences in what they were taught in Chinese classrooms and the reality of American culture. The majority of students indicated that what they were taught was helpful on some level, but that their experiences with American culture were very different. One of the most compelling statements from students in regard to what instructors in China could do to better prepare students for American culture was the suggestion: “Maybe in Chinese college maybe some professor could have us as a team to give a presentation in class about what we learned in America. We are [the] first group from my college to visit America.” This statement has strong implications for teaching American culture in China. Perhaps hearing from students who have experienced American culture firsthand would help other students in China gain a more realistic view of the culture.

While English is a required subject in Chinese schools beginning in second grade and continuing through their postsecondary education (Lam, 2007), there is a gap between what is taught and what Chinese students experience when they arrive in the U.S. Many of the students in this study indicated that their English classes in China did help prepare them for speaking English in the U.S.; however, as would be expected, they observed some differences. One student mentioned the different English accents spoken in America; another student discussed the difference in the formal English he learned in China as compared to the informal English he heard in America. Several students expressed worry and low confidence about their English speaking skills.

The results of this study indicate there are differences in the constructs of American culture as taught in Chinese classrooms and the reality of American culture. Also there are differences in the English models taught in China and spoken English in the U.S. Awareness of these gaps may help instructors in China better prepare students for study in the U.S. Implications of this study may help U.S. educators better understand Chinese international students and reduce obstacles in the learning process to create more positive experiences. A better understanding of how Chinese students learn and communicate may help instructors to reduce discrimination and bridge the gap between Chinese and American cultures.



Limitations

The sample size of the study was small and included eight Chinese students. Their perceptions and opinions as they expressed them cannot be generalized to other Chinese students who come to the U.S. for the first time. Random or representative sampling was not used. Because the students visited only four American universities in a four week time frame, they may not have encountered all features of the classroom environment. Also, because their time in the U.S. was brief, their exposure to American culture and English communication was limited.

Recommendations

This study reported findings on the preparedness of eight Chinese undergraduate students for American culture and English communication while visiting the U.S. for the first time. Their exposure to American culture and spoken English in the U.S. was somewhat brief, and the sample size of eight students was small. Therefore, this study should be replicated in a broader setting and include a larger sample size. This study may serve as a pilot study and be expanded to multiple locations in the U.S. with larger groups of Chinese students. In addition, further study might include quantitative data such as demographics of the participants. Additionally, consideration should also be given to how teachers in China perceive American culture and how they transmit their knowledge to their pupils. Further research may delve into the English curricula of Chinese classrooms, including how curricula are defined and how they differ from one region of China to another.

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