

# A Chinese Student's Adaption in a university classroom in the United States: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** The case study investigates a Chinese student's perception of the major differences in classroom teaching and learning styles between the United States and China. The Chinese student experienced classroom cultural shock in an American university, and he adjusted his attitude and learning strategies to get a better adaption. The results are applicable for Chinese students who come to study in the United States.

## 1. Introduction

As the number of Chinese students increased in American academic settings, Chinese students appear to become major participants in the studies of classroom management and performance. Their performance in classrooms received great attention from Second Language Studies scholars. According to the report, Chinese students' hardness of adaptation to American classrooms is investigated through various research lens, and cultural perspectives are widely discussed.

Chinese students share similar Confucian cultural background in classroom settings, and the obedient regulation roots in Chinese classroom culture. Facing the Socratic style of classroom in the United States, Chinese students came across cultural shock, and they should undergo the process of the acculturation. Their cultural adaptation in classroom appears to be overlooked through the good outcomes of their final scores. The studies looking at Chinese students' explanations of their cultural adaptation experience can provide foundation to investigate the intercultural communication in classroom settings.

## 2. Literature Review

Chinese students' performance received grand attention from scholarship. The research, grounded in Confucian-Socratic framework, discussed "Face" value, anxiety, and classroom settings as factors to influence Chinese students and their performance.

### 2.1 Confucian-Socratic framework

Tweed and Lehman (2002) proposed a Confucian-Socratic framework to analyze the influence of different cultural contexts on academic situations. Socratic-oriented learning involves "overt and private questioning, expression of personal hypotheses, and a desire for self-directed tasks" (P. 93). In the contrary, Confucian-oriented learning involves "effort-focuses conceptions of learning, pragmatic orientations to learning, and acceptance of behavioral reform as an academic goal" (p. 93). Confucius taught his students to respect and obey authorities, where as Socrates leads to question others.

### 2.2 Face, "MianZi"

Chinese students, due to collectivism, paid much more attention to the "face," which was commonly called "MianZi." do. MianZi is understood as a common cultural factor in sociocultural context. According to Liang (2011), the Chinese MianZi culture that shows historical spirit of cooperation

primarily grounded in the Chinese feudal family system and the Confucian Ethical Code. Chinese scholar Lin Yutang (1936) defined MianZi as the major Chinese principle, together with Fate and Favor. Chinese students had concerns of speaking in front of American classmates. MianZi represented the speakers' identity in interpersonal and collective relationships in the classroom (Zhou&Zhang 2017). American students were trained to speak out their opinion in public especially in the classroom, and American students did not evaluate face as much importance as Chinese students

### *2.3 Anxiety Study*

Research from Non-Native Speakers of English studying at North American universities for academic purposes had displayed that Chinese students were experiencing considerable challenges and anxiety in their academic studies (Huang, 2003. 2005; Huang& Klinger, 2006; Sun& Chen, 1997). They often felt uncomfortable with the students' behaviors at North American classrooms. Cultural differences in the classroom created anxiety which negatively affected their achievement (Sun& Chen, 1997).

### *2.4 Classroom settings and environment*

Classroom settings and environment in American universities were unfamiliar to Chinese students who got used to the rule-abiding, authority-respecting classrooms. According to Huang (2005), there were five instructional factors that affect Chinese students' lecture understanding. First, American professors' poor lecture organization influenced students' lecture comprehension. Second, American professors did not closely follow the textbook while lecturing and their failure to follow textbooks created challenges for lecture comprehension. Third, American teachers did not write much on the board while lecturing, which negatively affected their lecture comprehension. Fourth, American teacher did not usually provide lecture summaries which could facilitate students' understanding of lectures. Finally, many participation and group discussion distracted students' attention and therefore negatively affected their comprehension.

## **3. Research Methods**

Interview was used to gather the data in this study. The data collection for this case study was done through a series of personal interviews with a Chinese student, D. My interviewee D came from China mainland, and he was an undergraduate student majoring in Accounting at a university in Minnesota. He went to college in the United States after graduating from high school in China, and he had been to the United States for four years. After he graduated from the college, he continued his education to Master degree.

The interview were given over the phone. Interview questions included facets of classroom setting, interaction, and the influence of professors: "What do you think of teacher's role in the current classroom setting? Could you please give some examples? What do you think of student's role in the classroom? Could you please give some examples? What's the interaction between professors and students in your classroom? Examples? What do you think of the interaction? What are your concerns on interaction between professors and students in your classroom? Why? What are your expectations on your classes? What is the reality in the classroom? How do you adjust your classroom learning strategies and approaches?"

## **4. Results**

There were five major differences between D's anticipation and reality. D had experienced the cultural shock in the classroom, and he was undergoing cultural adaption. He gradually adapted to the reality by changing his learning strategies.

#### 4.1 *The Teacher's Role*

D agreed that professors in the classes on college level should be knowledgeable and should be able to clearly express their thoughts. They should have professional knowledge and related experiences, and they also needed to have good communication skills in order to clarify their instruction. However, in the actual classroom, D argued that some professors did not well perform their teachers' roles. For example, D said that Prof. R taught him Accounting Concepts and Corporate Finance. She got the CPA, and she was CFO and owned her company before she became a college professor. Prof. R had profound experiences and enough knowledge regarding accounting; however, she was not good at teaching. In class, she always gave illogical lecture which made D hard to follow, and she cannot answer all the questions that students asked. Once, D asked her "Usually how large retailers or manufacturers which finance their customers classify their regular considerable interest income generated from customers? Whether as financing activity or operating activity?" Prof. R said "I don't know." D was upset, and he thought that professors should know everything.

#### 4.2 *The Student's Role*

D thought that student should be a good listener and sometimes gave active responses. Whereas, in the real classroom, students actively participated in the classroom discussion, asked questions at any time, and even challenged professors. From D's perceptive, American students always interrupted the professors' logical instruction, and they always led the discussions or even the class themes. He felt that sometimes he tried his best to follow professors' instruction, but professors seemed to be led by some students who had questions. In D's opinion, students cannot interrupt professors' instruction in the class and usually asked questions after class.

#### 4.3 *The interaction between professors and students*

According to D, professors and students had different interactions in the different courses. In his Major courses which were all lectures, the interaction should be as few as possible. He wanted to gain knowledge from professors, the authority. In the contrary, in the general education courses, the more group discussions happened, the better students understood the reading material.

In all the courses, American students always interrupted the courses by asking questions. After D had been familiar to the model of classroom interaction between professors and students, he tried to ask questions during the class. However, D also had concerns on his interaction with professors. D's English pronunciation had accent, and sometimes professors cannot understand his questions. Hence, professors always gave irrelevant answers to the questions. On behalf of "face", D always chose to be silent at the moment.

#### 4.4 *The interaction within students*

From D's personal experience, in typical Chinese classrooms, students should at least knew each other and became familiar with each other. They should have more interaction in the out of class. In his American university, D stressed an importance on the communication with other students especially with American students. In majority of classes, the time was limited for students to interact. For a 75-min long class, group discussion took only 10 min to 15 min in total. Classmates did not know each other very well, so D felt that they did not build good relationship with each other. On the contrary, in D's Federal Tax class, although there was no enough time for students to have discussion, professor required students to finish homework in group. There were three Tax classes per week, and D had at least three group discussion with different students in his class. These activities promoted D's communication with Americans, so he felt good in the class.

In response to his classroom challenges and frustrations, D stated that it was important for him to adjust his learning strategies in order to adapt to the American classroom environment. "I need to get adaptive to American classroom learning context. I start to ask professor questions during the class, and I start not to concern my face a lot. I always talk with professors about my opinions on group discussion and international students' thoughts. My professors are willing to help us and assign more

group discussion after class to enhance communication between international students and native students.”

## 5. Conclusion

Guided by the Confucian-Socratic framework (Tweed & Lehman, 2002), this study investigated a Chinese student's perceptions of the major differences in classroom teaching and learning styles between the United States and China. The Chinese student had cultural shock, and he adjusted his attitude and learning strategies to get a better adaption in American classroom. The results were important for Chinese students who will come to study and are studying in the United States.

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