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The Academic and Cultural Adaptation of Chinese International Students at UMass Boston: The Struggles and Progress from the Perspectives of Students and Professors

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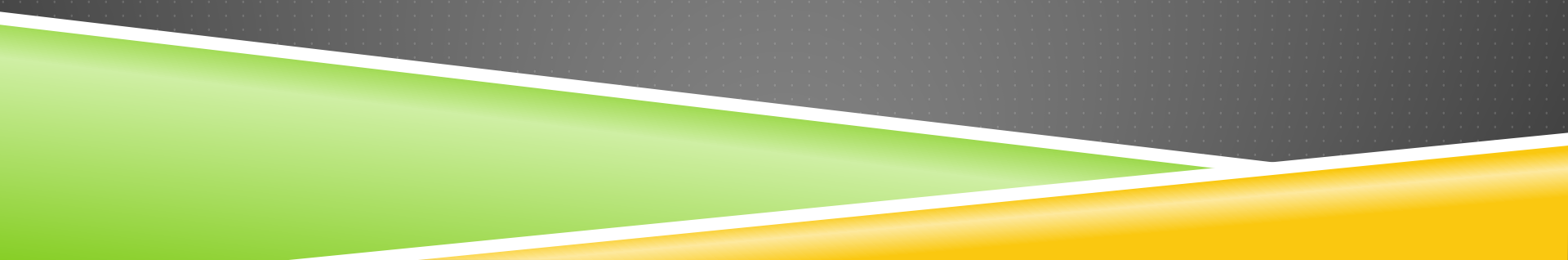
**THE ACADEMIC & CULTURAL
ADAPTATION OF CHINESE INT'L.
STUDENTS AT UMB:**

**The Struggles & Progress from the
Perspectives of Students & Professors**

PANELISTS:

- ◆ Pingping Chen- Visiting Chinese Scholar
- ◆ Teddy Chocos- ESL Freshmen Faculty
- ◆ Lorena Fuentes- ESL Freshmen Faculty
- ◆ Shanrui Yong (Ray) and Yang Gao (Anstrid)-
Chinese International Students

TODAY'S DISCUSSION:

- ◆ Pingping Chen- Yearlong observations and interviews
 - ◆ Teddy Chocos- Silent students and Free writing
 - ◆ Lorena Fuentes- Humor and Peer review
 - ◆ Ray and Anstrid- Cross-cultural Perspectives
- 

PURPOSE:

As Vivian Zamel (1995) urges in her article “Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL Students Across the Curriculum: ”

“It is when we take risks of this sort, when we take this step into the unknown, by looking for evidence of students’ intelligence, by rereading their attempts as coherent efforts, by valuing, not just evaluating, their work, and by reflecting on the critical relationship between our work and theirs, that opportunities are created not only for students but for teachers to learn in new ways.”(15)

YEARLONG OBSERVATIONS

- ◆ Reflective ESL instructors and engaging pedagogy
- ◆ The diverse campus, yet homogenous ESL classrooms
- ◆ Active vs. Passive students
- ◆ Linguistic and cultural factors contributing to the struggles and progress

ACADEMIC STRUGGLES IN ESL COURSES AND MAINSTREAM COURSES



► Plagiarism

“In China, we are expected to copy the English composition models while it is considered plagiarism, which is such a serious issue at UMB.” (Translated from Mandarin to English)

► Critical Thinking

“I have stayed in Chinese education system for 12 years. I received complete basic education in China. I think Chinese basic education is in the top of the world, but the significant shortcoming is it is not good for students’ critical thinking. That’s what I can get in America. Before I attend UMB, I have known how to learn efficiently. But the challenges here are how to learn usefully.” (Student’s original response via email)

► Language Barrier

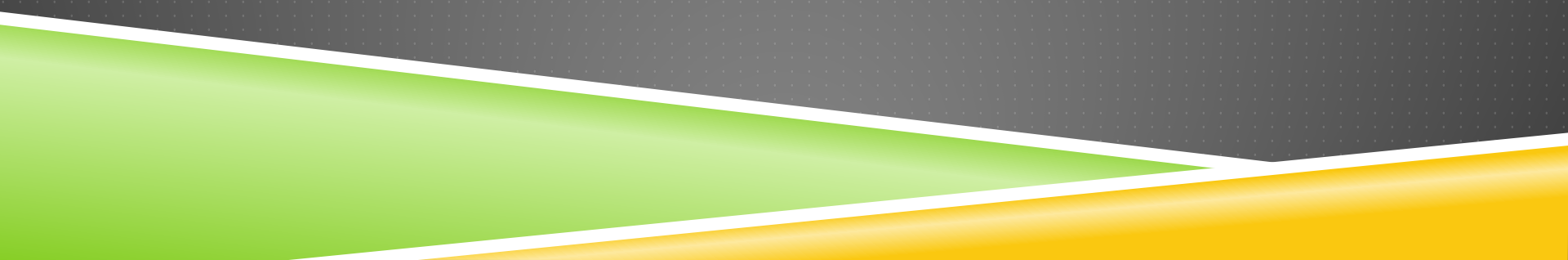
“Being a nonnative student in the mainstream course doesn’t mean my knowledge is weaker, rather I get higher grade than most of them. However, my language barrier prevents me from expressing myself and participating in the class discussion.” (Translated from Mandarin to English)

► Professors’ Expectations

“In other courses, the biggest challenge is sometimes teachers are so fast and no stop for three hours that I can’t follow them all the time. These cases make me feel bad.” (Student’s original response via email)

ACADEMIC PROGRESS AND VARIED LEARNING ATTITUDES



- ▶ Building knowledge and expanding ideas
 - ▶ Appreciating ESL instructors' patience and writing assistance
 - ▶ Learning to take a position, supporting their ideas with valid evidence and making connections among readings
 - ▶ Adjusting to class participation, brainstorming and in-class free writing
 - ▶ Valuing one's originality and creativity
 - ▶ Acknowledging that both reading and writing develop critical thinking and promote learning
- 

THE SILENT STUDENTS



REFLECTING ON PARTICIPATION

1. When teachers ask questions in the classroom, how do you feel and what do you do?
2. Do you consider yourself an active/passive participant? Describe under what conditions, background and/or reasons. Consider **the following**:
 - ▶ Teacher
 - ▶ Class
 - ▶ Peers
 - ▶ Subject
 - ▶ Comfort level
 - ▶ Knowledge
 - ▶ Attitudes
 - ▶ Personality
 - ▶ Confidence
 - ▶ Culture
3. Do you see any value in student participation, why/why not?

THE RESULTS OF THE INACTIVE STUDENTS:

- ▶ *“I am a little shy and nervous because I may not know the answer.”*
- ▶ *“If the professor does not ask me to talk, I just want to avoid answer it because I feel students laugh at me.”*
- ▶ *“My English is poor and I know students don’t understand when I speak and don’t do it.”*
- ▶ *“I am not that good to provide an answer.”*
- ▶ *“I am not prepared very well, I feel hesitation.”*
- ▶ *“I am not sure my answer going to correct or not.”*

- ▶ *“Because in this class their many student who can answer the question and get it right.”*
- ▶ *“I feel nervous often. Because I’m afraid to make a mistake.”*
- ▶ *“If I don’t know the answer, I will feel embarrassed.”*
- ▶ *“I feel annoyed because maybe that day I feel sad and I don’t want to be involved in something. They will not stop and will ask Why? How? And so on.”*
- ▶ *“If I am silent, it means I don’t know it.”*
- ▶ *“I can’t find the words to express myself in English.”*
- ▶ *“I am afraid I may not say my point of view very well.”*

ACTIVE STUDENT RESPONSES:

- ▶ *“I feel okay because I came here to study and give an example of my opinion and it is the responsibility of each student.”*
- ▶ *“I used to feel very nervous, dizziness, shake and even fainted a couple of times when I was a kid because I used to have very fond relationships with my former classmates and was afraid to fail in front of them. One day it just ended when I moved here. I always raise my hand if I have something to say.”*
- ▶ *“If I am not an active learner, I will get an ‘F.’”*

- ▶ *“I am engaging in the class.”*
- ▶ *“I prefer to listen to someone else’s voice (idea). After I gave my personal experiences that make people understand very well.”*
- ▶ *“Sometimes I would like to answer when the professor ask I try to provide the answer. I feel I want to try after I saw other speak up.”*

RESULTS ON SELF-REFLECTION:

- ▶ *“This class helped me improve my speaking skills by the small group activities and help me built new confidence in me.”*
- ▶ *“I don’t have much confidence to speak in class because when I’m in elementary school I tried to answer my teacher’s question but ended up by being laughed and becoming a joke. My friends said it’s a dumb answer. That’s why I have less confidence in class.”*

- ▶ *“I think I am a passive learner because I don't really like to speak out much. Back I was in school in my country, I don't have power and freedom to think. When I have a question, I have to active myself to understand it. “*
- ▶ *“In my other class, I don't understand what the professor is teaching. When I return home, I have to review everything by myself. I never participate in this class because he only speaks.”*
- ▶ *“I have recently become an active reader and speaker after taking English 101. I made markings of what I am reading, highlight quotes which convey the reader's ideology. I have become more confident about my reading and now want to speak more in class.”*

OVERALL ANALYSIS

▶ Inactive students lack:

- Knowledge
- Confidence
- Responsibility
- Understanding

▶ Active students are:

- Comfortable
- Motivated
- Prepared
- Fearless

THE VALUE OF PARTICIPATION

“You learn because this is a critical thinking class. Examples and answers from all the students not only help to know more about the subject, but I witness their experiences, and level of speaking English.” (Student’s voice)

CHALLENGES IN THE ESL COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Using Humor and Letter Responses to Create a Learning Community



CHALLENGES

- ▶ Chinese students tend to be nervous and anxious when asked to participate in class. Generating discussion in the class seems almost impossible, and if so, they will discuss in Chinese.
- ▶ When trying to engage them in peer review, Chinese students are apprehensive as they believe feedback must come from an expert (teacher).

FINDING STRATEGIES TO CREATE A MORE RELAXED ENVIRONMENT:

Strategy 1— First day of class: Ice Breaker

Step 1

- ▶ Students are asked to write for 20 minutes about any surprising, scary or funny anecdote that has happened to them, and they are asked to not write their names.
- ▶ They write most of the anecdote, but they don't write the end (e.g. To be continued...)
- ▶ Once they are done, I collect their papers, shuffle them, and I randomly hand them in to the students.

Step 2

- ▶ Students are asked to read the anecdote they were assigned and predict what the end might be.
- ▶ They are to ask to think about other questions they might want to ask the anecdote's author to get to know him/her better.
- ▶ Once they have read the story, they are asked to find the person who wrote the story.

Step 3

- ▶ Students interview each other for about 10-15 min.
- ▶ They are previously asked to find out the end of the story.
- ▶ Finally, they introduce their classmates, tell their classmates' anecdotes and share what they have learned about him/her.

STRATEGY 2: USING HUMOR TO GENERATE COMMUNITY IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

- ▶ What do I refer to by “humor”?

Anything that creates a feeling of fun and amusement in the classroom

- ▶ Examples of humor include: funny stories, funny comments, jokes (inside jokes), wordplays, sarcasm, etc.
- ▶ Why using humor in the ESL classroom?

According to Ziyaeemehr (2011), *“there is extensive research on the use of humor in the ESL classroom that indicates the there is now a substantial body of research indicating the facilitative role of humor in general education as well as second language teaching/learning processes.”* (P.111)

A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE...

Fall 2013

- ▶ B/C Course: 20 Chinese students and 1 Korean student
- ▶ English Level: Basic (for College ESL students)
- ▶ Strategies: Ice Breaker Activity and Humor
- ▶ Results: students were more engaged in class discussion, and their sense of community increased .
- ▶ Students would seek any opportunity to talk about their experiences and to laugh at each other (respectfully) (e.g. nicknames related to class discussion)
 - ❖ “The Giver”
 - ❖ “The Islander”
 - ❖ “Enough”

SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF USING HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM INCLUDE:

- ▶ Increase of instructional effectiveness (e.g. engagement)
- ▶ Increase of persuasiveness when conveying an idea (teachers and students)
- ▶ Increase of student motivation and confidence to participate in class (output)
- ▶ Increase in the sense of community in the classroom (teacher-students & students-students)
- ▶ An enjoyable and relaxed classroom atmosphere

SOME CONSIDERATIONS...

- ▶ Some teachers are just humorless.
- ▶ Using humor in the classroom will be determined by the instructor's personality and conviction of using this method.
- ▶ As a sociolinguistic, and more specifically as a sociocultural phenomenon, humor in the ESL classroom needs to be created within the classroom community, and not from the sociocultural context of the target language itself (ESL).
- ▶ Humor implies setting boundaries when it comes to the seriousness of submitting assignments on time, being prepared, coming to class on time and being respectful to one another.

CHALLENGES WITH TRADITIONAL PEER REVIEW

- ▶ **My Assumption:** this activity would dramatically help them improve their writing skills and discover new perspectives.
- ▶ **Reality in the classroom:**
 - ✓ Students clearly felt disdain for this activity.
 - ✓ Peer review was regarded more as a punishment than a way to practice their writing skills.
 - ✓ It seemed students did not believe in the effectiveness of this exercise.

STUDENTS' REASONS FOR DISLIKING PEER REVIEW

- ▶ Peer review is boring.
- ▶ Their classmates' feedback is either condescending or too praiseworthy.

Some cultural reasons...

- ▶ Peer review is rare (if not inexistent) in their cultures.
- ▶ Students are not experts on writing; their feedback is a waste of time.
- ▶ Teachers are the only ones who can provide quality feedback.
- ▶ Grammar is essential to good writing; classmates cannot notice those mistakes.

FINDING A NEW STRATEGY: RESPONSE LETTER

Why a Response Letter?

- ▶ A letter is almost a universal concept.
- ▶ A letter/email implies a more informal, non-threatening activity.
- ▶ Writing a letter would release the students' burden to be "expert evaluators."
- ▶ Students would be more focused on meaning than technicalities of writing.
- ▶ A letter entails a form of real communication.

BENEFITS OF WRITING RESPONSE LETTERS

- ▶ Students unconsciously become real critical readers who are not desperately focused on form, but contextual meaning.
- ▶ Students give substantial comments that vary from commenting on the writer's ideas and position on the issue to expanding the analysis on the readings the students are responding to.
- ▶ There is significantly less concern for grammar, unless it obfuscates the meaning of the sentence(s).
- ▶ Response Letter is a unique opportunity for additional written interaction which is highly beneficial for ESL students.

AN EXAMPLE...

“Following your reflection about the reading, your point seems like people should have the right to choose their last moment of life for their dignity, and in terms of facing serious diseases like cancers, people need to keep their attitude toward them positive and be realistic, not having unreasonable hope. I also support your thought about Jolly’s suicide; he is the author John West’s father. However, when I read your writing, I have some questions.

First, in your introduction, I am confused by one sentence. The entire sentence is “This story shows the other side of human thinking and emotion.” Then, what is “the original side” of human thinking and emotion? I think this sentence is not connected well in the paragraph’s idea. If you develop your thoughts with explaining more about either what “the other side” is, or what “the original or common side” is, it would be a better paragraph.” (Xin)

REFLECTIONS

- ▶ The Response Letter activity is a way of expressing the self in the form of a capable critical reader and writer.
- ▶ Taking away the specific terminology from the peer review exercise enhances their inner desire to question, advise, and comment on topics in which they are engaged.
- ▶ Students become readers and advisers, and not judgmental evaluators who lack expertise.
- ▶ This new approach generates a relaxed atmosphere within the classroom when giving constructive feedback on their writing.
- ▶ It also creates a reading community where the students and the teacher are eager to learn from each other while fostering real communication.

“Language for [ESL students] is not just an unmotivated formal construct but a lived embodied reality. It is not simply an agglomeration of encoded meanings, that are grasped intellectually, cognitively internalized, and then applied in social contexts; rather it is the potential medium for the expression of their innermost aspirations, awarennesses, and conflicts.” (Kramersch, 2009)

RAY'S REFLECTION

Silence Means:

- ▶ Cultural heritage
- ▶ Respectful behavior
- ▶ Understanding rules
- ▶ taking a neutral position

Challenges are:

- ▶ Speaking in class
- ▶ Forming an opinion
- ▶ Citing sources
- ▶ Researching databases
- ▶ Finding quotations
- ▶ Defending an argument

ASTRID'S REFLECTION

Chinese Teaching Style

- ▶ Students only follow what the teacher says.
- ▶ Students are somehow afraid of teachers.
- ▶ There is a lot of pressure to get the expected results.
- ▶ Participation is seldom encouraged.

American Teaching Style

- ▶ Students are encouraged and expected to talk in class.
- ▶ Students' opinion is valued.
- ▶ Teachers emphasize on creativity and autonomy.
- ▶ There is not enough pressure to complete and do well on assignments.
- ▶ Students take total responsibility for their academic standing.

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO HELP US SUCCEED SHOULD COME FROM BOTH AMERICAN TEACHERS AND CHINESE STUDENTS...

- ▶ Some moderate pressure should be part of the American teaching style to help us transition into this educational system because we are used to be pressured to accomplish assignments.
- ▶ We honestly need some more pressure because most Chinese students don't know how to take the initiative to study with all this freedom or autonomy we encounter here in America.
- ▶ On the other hand, Chinese students should find more strategies to be more active in class and autonomous in terms of our responsibilities with our assignments.
- ▶ The change or transition will be very slow because getting rid of 12 years of being under the Chinese teaching style cannot happen in one or two semesters.

REFLECTION ON TEACHERS' LEARNING THROUGH STUDENTS' STRUGGLES

- ▶ *“Without struggle, there is no learning”* (Vygotsky, 1978)
- ▶ *“Teachers will hear collaborative dialogue and private speech which may offer them insights into what learners know and what they do not know, what they want and do not want to know, and what they need to know to move forward developmentally”* (Swain, 2011)
- ▶ *“Language learning is not just a cognitive struggle, it is a cognitive and emotional struggle...by teaching L2 emotional expression, linguistically and socioculturally, we may help our students to be able to use their L2 as tools for thinking and emoting”* (Swain, 2011)

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