Towards an Understanding of International Classroom Cultures

Center for Teaching & Learning Resources
International Student & Scholar Services
November 10, 2006

Chinese Classroom Culture

Presenter
Zhen Li, Ph.D. Student, English
Shaokang Wang, Ph.D. Student, Finance
Contributor
Li Li, Ph.D. Student, Geography

Agenda
- Chinese Students’ Prior Educational Experiences
- Chinese Students in the U.S.
- Suggestions for U.S. Faculty

Chinese Students’ Prior Educational Experiences

- Test-Oriented Education System
  - Teachers and students are trained for the test.
    - Students have to memorize to prepare for exams. They also have to practice taking exams.
    - Knowledge that won’t be covered on the test is not regarded as important.
  - Educational Reform is in effect, yet in a limited sense.
    - Teachers’ dilemma: University exam requirements vs. Arousing students’ interest in learning
    - “High score, low ability” students

Chinese Students’ Development

- Elementary school students participate actively in class and compete with one another, although they have to obey strict rules in class.
- Junior high school students become self-conscious and mute. They begin to feel the pressure of university entrance exams.
  - Don’t want to lose friends by “showing off”
- High school students are completely focused on University entrance exams. They do not have time for fun.
Chinese Students’ Relations with Teachers

- Teachers are viewed as role models for students.
- Students give teachers tremendous respect.
  - Follow teachers’ instructions. Obey teachers.
  - Stand up when teacher enters classroom.
- Students perform a lot of tasks for teachers.
  - Clean blackboards and classroom
  - Carry heavy items

The Authority of Teachers

- Teachers are viewed as absolute authorities.
  - Prefer not to be challenged publicly
  - Prefer not to admit they don’t know something
  - May view questions as:
    - interfering with delivery of lecture
    - challenge rather than sign that students are actively engaged in learning process

Students expect teachers to be authoritarian.
- If not, the students are dissatisfied. They will conclude that the teacher is not learned enough.
- Teachers are expected to have the correct answer to every question.

Communication in Chinese Classrooms

- Traditionally, teachers view themselves as distributors of previous knowledge, not facilitators of learning process
  - Are focused on their lectures
  - Tend not to be flexible or open to spontaneity
  - Tend not to welcome questions in class
  - May view questions as sign they failed to deliver knowledge effectively
  - Prefer questions during class breaks or after class

Students hesitate to ask questions.
- Don’t want to interrupt lecture and cause teacher to digress
- Don’t want to appear foolish or be embarrassed

Students hesitate to answer questions
- Fear of making mistakes
  - If the question is easy, they won’t bother to answer it. They will only answer challenging questions.
- No longer universal. Depends on educational level and degree of Western influence.

Chinese Students in the U.S.
Chinese Students’ Class Participation

- Do not participate actively in class
  - Are afraid of making mistakes in English
  - Don’t want to be embarrassed or appear stupid
  - Need more time to review the material before discussing it
  - Prefer to be called on by teacher

Chinese Students’ Questions

- Chinese culture is abstract
- Students are accustomed to handling things in abstract way.
- Theoretical (rather than concrete) knowledge is esteemed → Individual is viewed as more learned
- Students tend to ask very broad questions without well-established context.

Chinese Students’ Assumptions about Communication

- Are accustomed to everyone having same standard knowledge
- See no need to express anything that is common sense or known to all
- Are not in habit of providing background information or defining context
- May overlook fact that people have different assumptions

Chinese Cultural Values

- Chinese culture values solving difficult problems.
- Ability to solve difficult problems is “secret weapon” in fierce exam competition
- Chinese culture values what was produced, not clear explanation of how the problem was solved
- As a result, students give formulas without any explanation.

Suggestions for U.S. Faculty
Organize small group discussions in class and small group projects outside class.

Encourage students to ask questions via e-mail or discussion board.

Invite / Encourage students to ask questions in class. Set aside time for Q&A. If international students don’t speak, ask them at the end what they think.

Lure students to participate in class with class participation grades.

Encourage students to come to office hours and TA sessions.

Mix students up. Don’t let them self-segregate.

Explain in detail what is expected in presentations. Provide clear guidelines, even examples.

Indian Classroom Culture

Presenters
Sudha Bomma - MBA Student
Mohit Virendra - Ph.D. Student, Computer Science & Engineering
Kavitha Bhase - Ph.D. Student, Pharmaceutical Sciences

Agenda

Roots of Indian Educational System
Indian Students’ Prior Educational Experiences
Indian Students in the U.S.
Suggestions for U.S. Faculty

Roots of Indian Educational System

- Guru = Teacher = God
- Religious Gurus
- Guru and God – Bow down to Guru first
Indian Students’ Prior Educational Experiences

More Aspects of Indian Classroom Culture
- Forbidden - eating, chewing gum, putting feet on desks and chairs, etc.
- Corporal punishment - used in Indian elementary and secondary schools
- Computers - not widely used in non-engineering disciplines in India
- PowerPoint - not used in Indian classrooms
- Textbooks - partially covered in class

More Aspects of Indian Classroom Culture
- Teamwork / Group projects – not used in Indian classes
- Plagiarism - not viewed as problematic in India
- Cheating on exams – very serious
- Indian students - taught to be tolerant and persevering

Indian Students’ Roles in Class
- Never address teachers by their first names
- Never smoke in presence of teachers (this behavior conforms to social expectations)
- Typically stand at full attention in presence of teachers

Indian Students’ Roles in Class
- Try to minimize interactions with teachers
  - In response to teachers who do not encourage classroom interaction
  - View students who volunteer in class as brownnosers
  - Final exams are not teacher-dependent → no point in impressing / interacting with teachers
- Afford teachers perfunctory respect

Aspects of Indian Classroom Culture: Grading
- Not done on a curve in India
- Results in intense competition
- Causes students to pressure their professors a lot about grades
- No points for attendance, class participation or projects (except for engineering and science disciplines)
Grading (cont.)

- Final exams
  - Graded by faculty at other universities
  - Determine one’s course grade

Indian Students in the U.S.

- Culture shock in initial interactions with U.S. professors
  - Unsure how to behave
  - Were inhibited too much in India
- Have difficulty knowing where boundaries lie
- Privacy, personal space and personal time are viewed differently in India than in U.S.

Suggestions for U.S. Faculty

- Not accustomed to assignments throughout semester
- Will not answer “starter” or rhetorical questions in class
- Will try to write as much as possible on exams to ensure that answer is found inside
- Won’t argue grades if professor is outside their comfort zone

- Believe that all is surmountable and rules can be bent through persistence
- Feel alienated by treatment by U.S. professors
  - Feel that U.S. professors deal with U.S. students as individuals, but Indian students as members of a group
Have students ask questions and make comments on paper in class. Use discussion boards.

Make group work diverse

Don’t use U.S. culture-centric examples in class (e.g. NFL)

Recognize Indian students’ respectful attitude (as communicated by their body language).

Be clear to Indian students about your (un)availability to answer questions.

Korean Classroom Culture

Presenters
Minsoo Kim, Ph.D. Student, Physics
Namsook Kim, Ph.D. Student, Learning & Instruction
Contributor
Soomin Sohn, Ph.D. Student, Learning & Instruction

Agenda

Korean Students’ Prior Educational Experiences
  • Pre-University Years
  • University Years
Korean Students in the U.S.
Suggestions for U.S. Faculty

Korean Students’ Prior Educational Experiences

Pre-University Years
  • University Entrance Exam
    • Korean high school students are under tremendous pressure.
    • Korean families make sacrifices to ensure their child’s success on the exam.
    • Failure on the exam has severe consequences.
**Pre-University Years**

- **Confucianism**
  - Teachers have the same status as the king and fathers.
  - Teachers are viewed as absolute authorities and mentors in life.
  - Students and parents give teachers tremendous respect.

- **Collectivism**
  - Group harmony is considered more important than individual goals.
  - Students abstain from asking individual questions during class time.

- **One-Way Instruction**
  - Korean teachers’ primary mode of instruction is the lecture.
  - Students are passive learners.

- **More Freedom for Students**
  - Students have opportunities to choose what to study (e.g., major field of study).
  - Many students begin to be interested in social issues.

**University Years**

- **Career-Driven**
  - Major fields of study are decided in the early years.
  - Students devote most of their time to career success.

- **A Wider Range of Relationships**
  - In some cases, teachers are less authoritative; students become more active.
  - In others, a hierarchical relationship remains unchanged or becomes more rigid.
University Years

- Military Service
  - Obligatory, long-term military service is a great concern for male students.
  - Pre- and post-military service students tend to differ greatly from one another.
  - Post-military service students tend to be more obedient to faculty and motivated about their careers.

Korean Students in the U.S.

Language Barrier

- English classes in Korea are taught in Korean. The focus is on grammar and reading.
- Korean students in the U.S. are very concerned about speaking in English.
- They tend not to participate in class as much as they want to.
- They are afraid of making mistakes in English and losing face.

Active Class Participation

- Korean students in the U.S. use alternative ways to participate.
  - Active listening
  - Detailed note-taking
  - Intensive reading before class
- These alternative ways may be misunderstood as inactive participation or lack of class preparation.

Culture-Specific, Non-Verbal Behaviors

- Korean students may avoid prolonged eye contact.
  - An expression of respect
  - Lack of confidence in English
- They may lose the chance to talk because they wait longer between turns.
  - Waiting long enough to ensure the previous speaker has finished is an expression of politeness.

Culture-Specific, Non-Verbal Behaviors

- Korean students may choose to be silent in class.
  - Modesty as a cultural value: Silence is golden.
  - Silent participation can be mistaken as ignorance or lack of interest.
Suggestions for U.S. Faculty

- Be clear about your expectations of students
  - Verbal / Non-verbal class participation
  - Assignments
- Understand diversity in the ways of active participation
  - Silence
  - Active listening

- Avoid assumptions
  - Lack of fluency in English ≠ academic incompetence
  - Avoidance of eye contact
  - Less use of small talk in English
- Create diverse bridges to enhance communication with students
  - Electronic communications
  - Invitation to one-to-one dialogue

- Be aware of linguistic differences
  - Ex. Confusing responses to negative questions
    T: Don’t you understand?
    S: Yes.
    [Yes, that’s correct. I don’t understand.]
    S: No.
    [No, that’s not true. I do understand.]

- Use strategies to promote understanding and learning
  - Paraphrase to check understanding
  - If possible, wait a short time before beginning a new topic

- Help students feel included
  - Reach out to Korean students in and out of class by showing cultural interest
    Ex. “What holidays do you observe?”
    Ex. “I enjoyed watching Ms. Pak play in the LPGA yesterday! I wonder if Korean girls learn golf in high school.”
Thank you for coming to our workshop!