

Cultural Conflicts in an Intercultural Classroom Discourse and Interpretations from a Cultural Perspective

Yuqin Zhao, Harbin Institute of Technology, China

Abstract

With more Chinese immigrating into New Zealand, there are more intercultural classrooms in schools and classes of various levels. Chinese teach Mandarin to New Zealanders and Chinese students are learning English from New Zealand teachers. Due to differences in cultures and educational traditions, teachers and students from different countries present different classroom behaviors. This causes some misunderstandings and even conflicts between teachers and students when they meet in the classroom. Based on the experiences of teaching Mandarin to New Zealanders and learning the MA courses from New Zealand teachers, and other teachers' experiences, the author of this paper discusses some differences in classroom behaviors of Chinese teachers and students and New Zealand teachers and students, and analyzes them from cultural perspectives, such as the concepts and views about kinship relationships, functions of education and roles of teachers in the classroom.

With large numbers of Chinese immigrating into western countries and westerners working and studying in China, there are more exchanges of teachers and students between China and western or English speaking countries, such as America, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Not only English, but also some other languages, such as Chinese, is learned as a second or foreign language. Teachers and students meet in classrooms either with the English teacher teaching English to Chinese students, or a Chinese teacher teaching Mandarin to English speaking students, forming intercultural classrooms with teachers and students from different cultures. Nowadays, intercultural classrooms are common in China and in English speaking countries.

The classroom setting represents a field of communication between teachers and students. When teachers and students from different cultures come into the same classroom, they are faced with some, if not all, differences in classroom behaviors, toward which people have different attitudes and feelings. If these attitudes and feelings go toward extremes, misunderstandings and miscommunications will be caused. Also culture shock might occur when one has expectations of one behavior and gets something completely different (Carol, 1986).

The classroom discourse in China is more oriented towards a hierarchical face system and assumes more respect from students toward the teacher. The teacher would value those who are more obedient and quiet in class, listen to him and follow his instruction with no conditions. He prefers standing in the front of the classroom with more dignity and authority, doing a most noble job of transmitting knowledge and truth to his students. In Chinese classrooms, the atmosphere is usually serious. Students should sit in lines and rows

straightly, listen to the teacher and should not interrupt the teacher's talk with questions. Students should show respect to their teachers both in class and out of class by greeting the teachers first. It is regarded impolite and even rude for students to call their teacher by the name. On the other hand, the western teacher would assume a lateral face system demanding more individual identity in class, not expecting his students to be so obedient as the Chinese students are, but rather, he would prefer the students to have more individuality of their own by showing more of their personal opinions. Therefore, in western classrooms, the atmosphere is more relaxed. Students can sit on the floor, pose question to the teacher any time they want, which may be during the teacher's lecture or after the teacher's lecture. These behaviors are not regarded as impolite or rude, but quite acceptable in western cultures.

From 2001 to 2005, I taught Mandarin to New Zealanders at the School of Languages at Auckland University of Technology, meanwhile I attended some graduate courses taught by New Zealand teachers. Being a Chinese teacher teaching New Zealanders and a Chinese student learning from New Zealanders, I had opportunities to notice some differences in classroom behaviors of Chinese teachers, New Zealand teachers, Chinese students and New Zealand students. I also noticed that due to the lack of knowledge of each other's cultures, some misunderstanding and even conflicts occurred between the teachers and students from different countries. The causes of differences in classroom behavior of teachers and students from China and New Zealand can be interpreted from cultural perspectives. In this article, I describe some different behaviors and opinions of teachers and students from China and New Zealand, based on my own observation and experiences in my teaching and learning, and experiences of some teachers and students. Then I tried to provide an explanation to these differences from the following cultural aspects: kinship relationships, function of education and roles of teachers and learners in the classroom. It is hoped that this analysis will help both teachers and students from different cultures have a better understanding of each other's culture and thus reduce the misunderstandings and conflicts.

Differences in Classroom Behaviors

Teachers and students develop their own norms and practice in their behaviours in the classroom. When teachers and students from different cultures come into one classroom, they might find so many differences from what they have been used to in their ways of speaking, their gestures, facial expressions, terms used to address each other and ways of participating the class activities. In the following section, three different behaviours of students and teachers of Chinese and New Zealand are described and discussed. One is the means of address between teachers and students, second is the in-class behavior of students, and finally the relationship between teachers and students.

Addressing between Teachers and Students

In a Chinese classroom, students always address their teacher very formally with a title of "teacher" plus his surname, such as "Teacher Zhang". This is the case for students of all ages, from children in kindergarten to doctoral students in universities. No matter where and when, students should always address the people who had ever taught them with "teacher" formally, even outside school and after their graduation. Chinese teachers also address their students in a very formal way, by their full names, never by their given names.

In New Zealand, students address their teachers in a less formal and more various ways. Mr., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Professor are sometimes used as titles, plus the surname. But more

often students just address their teacher by their given names. Teachers can also address their students by their given names.

In-class Behaviors

In a Chinese classroom the atmosphere is more serious and solemn than that in New Zealand. In all primary schools and high schools, at the beginning of each class, when the teacher comes into the classroom and declares the start of the class, students are instructed by the class monitor to stand up and show respect to the teacher by saying “Good morning, or good afternoon, teacher.” At the end of the class, when the teacher announces the end of the class, the whole class stand up to express thanks and respect again by saying “Goodbye, teacher.” Chinese teachers and students are very much used to the way of addressing each other formally. Teachers always look serious and seldom carry a smile on the face.

During the class, students are not allowed to interrupt their teacher for whatever reasons. If they have questions, they are told to put up their hands first and ask the question only with the teacher’s permission. So most Chinese students are used to the way of listening to the teacher in class and seldom ask questions in class. If they do want to ask some questions, they would rather wait till after class. However, in a Western classroom, it is quite normal for students to interrupt the teacher to ask a question or to indicate his or her own ideas during the teacher’s speech, sometimes even arguing with the teacher.

Relationship between Teachers and Students

In China, the relationship between teachers and students is more hierarchical, formal and distant. In addition, teachers assume more responsibility, obligation and authority towards students. Teachers have the responsibility of requiring, persuading and forcing their students to work hard for a better result of their study. If a teacher does not show that attitude, showing less concern to students’ marks, this teacher would be regarded as a less responsible teacher, even though he is preferred by those students who do not like working hard. Thus teachers are naturally endowed with the obligation to help those students who do not like to work hard to improve their studies. In most schools, one of the criteria in evaluating teachers is how many students the teacher has helped to make improvements not only in their study, but also in their morality. Therefore, once the students start their schooling, they are under the custody of the teachers who take responsibility for their study, their ways of living, their views of the world, their values and so on. To most students, teachers, particularly the primary school teachers, and high school teachers have higher authority than their parents. That is why it is often seen that when the parents cannot persuade the child to do something, they will go to the teacher for help, because the child will listen to the teacher rather than to the parents.

The following quotation was given by one university teacher who was in charge of one class. This would indicate how a Chinese teacher works with the students.

“Every morning, I went to the classroom to call the roll. When I found someone was always escaping from the class, I had to talk to him (do the mental education work), telling the student to behave well, explaining the importance of studying well. Once I went into the boys’ dorm to grasp one boy out of his bed because he was still sleeping while others were having classes.” (Bai, 2003)¹

In turn, Chinese students would regard this kind of teacher to be a good teacher, responsible:

“Miss Bai was a very responsible teacher, she was strict with us, we were grateful for her concern.” (one student from Bai’s class, 2003).²

From the experience of being a teacher in New Zealand and knowledge I learned from other teachers, I would say that teachers in New Zealand have less responsibility, obligation and authority than those in China. When Mary (a teacher from Auckland University of Technology) went to China to meet the group of students and their parents, many parents gave Mary their phone numbers and e-mail addresses, asking her to tell them how their children behaved at AUT in New Zealand. They were very surprised when Mary gave the parents the following answers because parents in China are used to getting every information about their children from the teacher:

“I can not tell you about your children’s behaviour, nor can I tell you about your children’s exam results. Your children are adults now, they have their privacy and rights to tell you or not to do so.” (Mary, 2002)³

“I know that Chris might be smoking, but I don’t want to tell his parents. I don’t have the right. Chris is 22 years old. He has the right to decide whether to tell his parents or not.” (Mary, 2004)

During the first year of teaching, I often complained to my colleagues in the Chinese section, that some students in my class were not working hard enough, coming late and leaving early, or not attending the class regularly. I wondered if I should say something or do something to those students. The response I got from them was NO. They told me that students had their freedom of choosing their way of learning. The students were responsible for their own study, not the teacher. This was confirmed by another experience when my daughter started her study at Epsom Girls Grammar. When my daughter and I met the dean on the first day of school, the dean told my daughter, that all her teachers would hope that she would work hard, but they would not force her to study hard. Both the teachers and parents had no right to force her to study hard.

In contrast, the relationship between teachers and students in New Zealand is less distant and more like friends. Students would not have the distant or fearful feeling towards their teachers. On the other hand, students are more relaxed with their teachers, which creates a more relaxed environment for teaching and learning”

“ I was so surprised that my teacher apologized to one of my classmates today in class, because the teacher asked that student, after an exam why she did not do as well as other students, and this made the student cry and run after of the classroom. If this happened in China, I am sure the teacher would say to the student, ‘how couldn't you do as well as others? Where is your head? What’s it for?’” (Dianna, 2004)⁴

Misunderstandings and Conflicts in an Intercultural Class

In each culture, teachers and students have very strong expectations about what normal classrooms are like (Stubbs, 1983). However, when Chinese and western people come into one classroom, the types of student and teacher behavior that are valued in each of their own culture will present misunderstandings and even cultural conflicts (Heidi, 1999).

A Chinese teacher might feel offended if the students interrupted his speech with some questions. A New Zealand teacher might feel that the Chinese students were so passive in their study because the students seldom participate in class activities. The Chinese students would think that the Kiwi teacher was not so serious about the students and

Kiwi students would think a Chinese teacher was too pretentious. When a Chinese teacher meets the western students, who are assuming more freedom in action and thoughts and tending to get more involvement in discussion and presentation of personal views, the Chinese teacher would feel that western students are less respectful and less disciplined. Sometimes it is difficult for a Chinese teacher to manage a western class, especially an inexperienced teacher.

A western teacher, on the other hand, would feel a classroom with Chinese students too stiff and dull. The Chinese students are less active in answering questions and participating in activities. Most of them will withdraw and try to hide themselves behind others when they are required to present views to the whole class or to have discussion with others.

In Chinese students' eyes, a western teacher would give the impression of not working so hard in class and seem to be more conservative in his knowledge, because he would not talk all the time in class and tell the students everything he knows. Instead, he will ask students to read books and discuss by themselves about answers to some questions. Some students will feel disappointed at having taken no notes after a class, because they feel it more fruitful only when they have taken down pages of notes in class, which is taken as the knowledge that they have learned from the teacher.

When western students meet a Chinese teacher, they feel the teacher seems to draw more attention to his own identity as a teacher, such as his dress, speaking manners and his behaviors in class. The dignity as a teacher is very important for a Chinese teacher. If he is asked a question by his students and he fails to give an answer, he would feel embarrassed and lose face. Therefore, western students have to be more cautious as to what to say or not in front of the teacher, so as not to let the teacher lose face.

Interpretation of the Behavioral Differences from Cultural Perspectives

The differences between a Chinese classroom discourse system and a New Zealand one can be interpreted from the perspectives of the kinship relationships in the face systems of the two cultures, the functions of education and roles of teachers.

From the Perspective of the Kinship Relationships in the Face System

According to Scollon and Scollon (2001), kinship relationships emphasize that people are connected to each other by having descended from common ancestors. The primary relationships are not lateral relationships, but hierarchical, like those between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, the older and the younger, the ruler and the ruled. This hierarchy of relationship is emphasized by Chinese philosophy, it can be based on age, experience, education, gender, geographical region and political affiliation, etc.

The relationship between the teacher and students in the classroom context is primarily a hierarchical relationship like that between father and son, but it is based on experience and education. The teacher is regarded as having more knowledge and experiences, though not in all areas as it used to be thought, but at least in the area he is teaching. From the first day of schooling, students are educated to respect the teacher because he is the one who is to teach them all knowledge. Children are told by their parents to listen to and respect their teacher. To some extent the teacher is regarded to be superior to parents. As a Chinese saying goes, "Once a man acted as your teacher even for only one day, he will be like your father for ever."

This hierarchical relationship requires the respect and politeness from the junior to the senior, the subordinate to the superior. Calling others by names, or given names, is regarded as showing less respect to others. So in a Chinese classroom, students never call their teacher by his name, but always his formal title, such as “teacher Wang”, or “teacher Li”, etc.

In contrast to the emphasis on hierarchical relationships by the easterners, kinship is far from being felt by westerners as a significant tie among members of society. In many cases, kinship relationships are seen as significant barriers to individual self-realization and progress. The popular practice of children calling their parents by their first names, students calling their teachers by their first names would be quite unpleasantly surprising to most Asians, but quite common for westerners. The westerners assert an extreme form of independence from kinship or other hierarchical relationships (Scollon and Scollon, 2001).

In the western classroom, regardless of the age and the social status of the teacher, students usually call the teacher by his first name. And the teacher also prefers to call his students by their first names. No one will have the sense of being less respected in this case. Commonly, students can interrupt their teacher’s talking by questions, clarification or even corrections in class. Often the teacher will encourage students to do so by waiting for them to finish.

From the Perspective of Function of Education, Roles of Teachers

From early days when education came to play its role in people’s life and teaching became a profession, the function of education and the teachers were differentiated to a great extent in Chinese and western beliefs. Scollon (1999) used the terms ‘Confucian discourse’ and ‘Socratic discourse’ to distinguish the Chinese and Western views of functions of education and teachers.

With regard to the function of education, Scollon (1999) claimed that in the Confucian discourse, teaching means passing on to the younger generation the best of the Chinese tradition, which took precedence over thinking for oneself. Confucianism teaches blind, rigid obedience to authority. It was more concerned about action. One learns in order to gain wisdom so that one may act appropriately. Instead of emphasizing truth, Confucius emphasized the consequences of using the right names in the doctrine of rectification.

Socrates was interested in truth and universal definition, his method centered on following the consequences of a hypothesis. It was believed that truth arises from reasoning. In western doctrine, “reason is accompanied by belief and desire. Reason operates on beliefs by means of inferences and explanations, and on desires in the judgment of outcomes in deliberating practical matters. Thus it forms the basis of voluntary, free action” (Scollon, 1999, p.18).

These traditional beliefs in the function of education affect the ways in which education is conducted. In the Chinese classroom, it is believed that students come for the purpose of learning some knowledge and truth, and getting trained to behave correctly and properly. The classroom is seen as the place to fulfill this purpose and what students should do in the classroom is to listen to the teacher and accept what the teacher says as the truth and knowledge. Students seldom feel it necessary to doubt the teacher’s knowledge and discuss what the teacher says. They just sit in quiet, orderly arranged seats in the classroom, all facing the teacher, focusing only on the teacher.

On the other hand, in a western classroom, students come for the purpose of

clarifying and understanding knowledge. They are supposed to get to the truth by analyzing, discussing the causes together with the teacher. They all have the freedom of participating in discussion of the hypotheses before they take them as truth. So it is commonly seen that students will have class, group and pair discussions in class. Commonly occurring in a western classroom, desks and chairs are arranged in a circle or U form, so students can sit facing each other for easy communication.

Chinese students never call their teacher by his or her first names, because first names are generally only used within in-group communication, where a relationship of symmetrical solidarity is observed. If students use the teacher's first names, they are crossing over a line between family and intimate communication.

The cultural differences in in-group and out-group communication are significant in classroom discourse. The relationship between the teacher and all students in eastern culture is hierarchical. The teacher and students might be regarded as members of different groups, while the westerners of same group. So in the western classroom, it is quite common to see the teacher and students address each other by their given names, since they are thought to be members of the same group and enjoy the same status in the group. But this cannot be the case for Chinese teachers and students, for they are thought to come from different groups and have to keep a hierarchical relationship. Especially for the subordinate, they cannot cross the barrier between them and the superiors first.

With regard to the role of the teacher, in Chinese tradition, the teacher was regarded as a messenger who transmitted the wisdom of the ancients. Instead of invoking an internal authority, he is seen as providing his students with an external authority (Scollon, 1999). In his study 'Confucius as a Teacher' (cited in Scollon, 1999), Chen summarized that the role of the teacher is to serve as a role model, to perfect virtue and assist in the development of talent, to answer questions and to cultivate his own virtue and learning while encouraging students to do the same. The teacher is regarded to be the knower, having the knowledge that all students have come for. The teacher is always right and students should never doubt the teacher's knowledge and argue with the teacher.

While in the western tradition, Socrates thought that the teacher's role in relationship to youth is to lead them to truth by means of questioning (Scollon, 1999). In order to get the truth, Socrates proceeds by asking a line of questions, "not in order to confute you, but ... (so), that the argument may proceed consecutively" (Jowett, 1990, p.256, cited in Scollon, 1999). So the purpose of refuting and being refuted is to establish truth.

These beliefs decide a participation framework in the classroom. When teachers and students meet in the classroom, they will take up their own positions, in terms of physical location, and participation in listening and speaking. In a Chinese classroom, with the desks and chairs arranged in formal lines and rows, and with all students facing the teacher, the role of speaking will be performed by the teacher and the role of listening by students. While in a western classroom, with desks and chairs in a circle or U form with students facing each other, both the teacher and students can play the role of speaking and listening. In western countries, children are encouraged to talk in class from early schooling. However, in China, children are told to sit quietly in class. The roles of the teacher and students are set from the beginning of schooling. Both the teacher and students gradually get used to their roles.

Conclusion

When teachers and students from different cultures come into one classroom, they

expect the other to behave in the way that is valued in their own culture. However, when reality goes against the expectation, misunderstandings and cultural shocks will arise. The unexpected feelings of the teachers toward the students, and of students toward teachers are due to their different cultural norms underlining these behaviors. The differences in these norms cause both teachers and students to feel the intrusion of more and more cultural differences into their own image of self and security (Brown, 1986). Gradually they will suffer culture stress and this will consequently lead to anger, to frustration, to helplessness and homelessness. These misunderstandings and cultural shocks might be reduced by people of one discourse system being conditioned to another. Learning some knowledge about other cultures, which can affect the discourse systems, is beneficial for intercultural communication. It is, therefore, strongly recommended that in language classrooms, culture learning is one unavoidable part of that language.

References

- Brown, H. D. (1986). Learning a second culture. In J. M. Valdes (Ed.), *Culture bound bridging the cultural gap in language teaching*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Carol, M. A. (1986). Culture bump and beyond. In J. M. Valdes (Ed.), *Culture bound bridging the cultural gap in language teaching*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Heidi, R. (1999). *Discourse analysis in the language classroom: The spoken language*. Vol. I. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Scollon, R. & Scollon, S. W. (2001). *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Scollon, S. (1999). Not to Waste Words or Students---Confucian and Socratic Discourse in the Tertiary Classroom. In Eli Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Stubbs, M. (1983). *Discourse analysis: The sociolinguistic analysis of natural language*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Notes

-
- ¹ Bai Shuying is a teacher from School of Social Sciences of Harbin Institute of Technology, in charge of the students of the cooperative program between HIT and AUT. She came to AUT together with the first group students and stayed for 4 months, continued her responsibility for charging the group as she did in China in 2003.
- ² Students: Chinese students coming from HIT as the cooperative program.
- ³ Mary Thoreau is a teacher at the School of Communication Studies, responsible for the group of Chinese students coming from Harbin Institute of Technology, as a cooperative program between Harbin Institute of Technology and AUT. She had been to Harbin Institute of Technology three times to teach short-term courses as part of the program.
- ⁴ Dianna Yao is my daughter, studying at Epsom Girls Grammar. She came from China in July 2004.