EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS: HOW THEY DIFFER AROUND THE WORLD: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ESL COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Expectations regarding teacher-student relationships, classroom interactions, testing and evaluation, and academic integrity vary widely around the world. Understanding these differences can be critical to enhancing the academic success of ESL (English as a Second Language) college students. Faculty working with ESL students often ask: “Why won’t my students participate more in class?” “Why do my students only repeat back what I’ve said?” “Why won’t they tell me what they think?” “Why don’t they ever know what courses they want to take when they come to registration or advisement?” Students often ask: “Why does my professor keep asking me to talk about my personal experiences? We never had to do that in my country. Why is it such a big deal to do that here?” There are a lot of “why’s” floating around the campus. This article addresses some of these questions.

Reviewing the literature about educational approaches around the world reveals certain commonalities and also some striking differences. It is essential when learning about these various approaches that our own orientation and value system be suspended (at least temporarily), so that each educational system can be understood in terms of the sociopolitical culture in which it is embedded.

All educational systems strive to produce effective citizens capable of participating in, and contributing to, their society. To the extent that this is defined differently, educational philosophies, administration, and practices evolve in very different ways. Almost all the systems I surveyed incorporate a strong nationalist message. What varies is how overt that message is.

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The relationship between religion and education is complex and clearly permeates many aspects of each country’s educational system. Affected are the system’s underlying philosophy and the world view it transmits to the daily interactions between teachers and students. Indeed, in Iran, which is 99% Muslim, the main objective of primary educations is the “creation of a favorable atmosphere for the purification and moral superiority of students.” This is followed by development of physical strength and academics (Marlow-Ferguson, 2002).

Even in nations professing a complete separation between public education and religion, the true interplay between the two is not hard to discern. Jin and Cortazzi (1998) point out that educational orientation and practices in mainland China are based on Confucian principles, even though teachers and students may be oblivious to their origins. Judeo-Christian values clearly frame the basic US/Anglo educational systems.

Perhaps the most readily apparent divide that distinguishes educational systems is the East/West dimension. Underlying the many differences between Eastern and Western cultures—and the educational systems that have emerged in each—is the value placed on a collectivistic vs. individualistic orientation.

Group-oriented cultures are marked by tight, firmly structured relationships. Individual needs are subservient to the group. Solidarity, harmony, and equal distribution of rewards among peers are prized. Modesty is valued, norms are set by the average student, and failure is seen as unfortunate but not dire. Success is seen as something linked to family, peers, and society as a whole. Conversely, in self-oriented cultures, relationships are looser and ties are forged according to self-interest. Status is based on individual accomplishment. Competition is encouraged, norms are set by the best students, and failure is perceived as more significant (Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Watkins, 2000). Those basic values impact everything from classroom atmosphere and didactic approaches to attitudes about academic dishonesty.

In both China and Russia, for instance, education is seen as a tool for strengthening the country rather than for the betterment of the individual. This fundamental premise has implications for the teacher-student relationship, the degree of educational advancement that is available and accessible to students, as well as the formulation of curriculum (which tends to be centralized in both countries). The concept of individualized courses of study is relatively new in both China and Russia. The truth is that existing curricular demands often render individual selections more of a theoretical option than a real academic choice for students to think about.

The collectivist mentality also accounts for the absence of tracking and higher level of support for, and lack of teasing of, weaker students...
observed in Asian schools. In Chinese and Japanese classrooms, fast learners help teach slow learners.

Another variable which seems to differentiate educational approaches would be political and/or economic stability. Countries plagued by political upheaval have usually not had the resources or the opportunity to develop consistent, effective educational systems to serve their citizens. Haiti, for example, experienced years of European domination, followed by internal instability. The educational system was designed more to maintain the balance of power than to meet the needs of the indigenous Haitian culture, even to the point of instruction being carried out in French rather than the native Creole tongue.

In many countries where a uniform approach exists on paper, profound dichotomies exist between wealthier urban schools and impoverished rural institutions. This has significant repercussions for didactic models, curricular offerings, retention, literacy rates, and other academic outcomes. Thus, the Haitian reliance on dictation and memorization becomes understandable when it is realized that limited resources have led to classes with as many as 70 or 80 students.

The issue of gender must also be considered. Within a specified culture, are educational experiences the same for male and female students? We know this is often not the case. But more complex questions need to be asked. For instance, how the gender of the teacher interacts with the gender of the pupil, and how past mixed or same-sexed teacher/student pairings come to bear on current teaching relationships. Likewise, do educational approaches and outcomes (within and between cultures) hold up when coeducational and same-sex institutions are compared?

Even concepts of intelligence are culture-based. Westerners think of intelligence as innate and relatively fixed, though somewhat vulnerable to environmental influences. Chinese students, teachers, and parents view intelligence as something that can be improved by hard work. Lack of achievement is generally attributed to a failure to work hard, rather than a lack of ability (Henderson, 1990; Watkins, 2000).

Lastly, the increasing trend towards globalization affects education. Dimmock and Walker (2000) define globalization as the tendency for similar policies and practice to spread across political, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Societal culture, on the other hand, represents an enduring set of values, beliefs, and practices that distinguishes one group of people from another. They note that the process of globalization may be leading to forms of political organization (for example, economic regions or trade blocs) that transcend the traditional nation state. This, in turn, challenges the concepts of citizenship that are such essential components of almost all school programs.
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

What does all this mean in terms of daily educational experiences? First, let’s look at the teacher-student relationship, and the methodologies that flow from that relationship. In most Western settings, the teacher’s role is conceived primarily in terms of transmission of knowledge and/or skills. The Chinese teacher, in contrast, is viewed as a moral guide and friend or parent figure with valuable knowledge that is a student’s duty to learn. This relationship is reflected in the Chinese motto: “Respect the teacher and love the pupil” (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1991). Leadership (and teaching) is seen as a process of influencing relationships and modeling “desirable” behavior. Perhaps this added affective component explains the corresponding behavioral differences that have been observed (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). When comparing British and Chinese students, in Britain good students obeyed and paid attention to the teacher. In China, students and teachers assumed that all students would behave in this way. Consequently, Chinese teachers spent little time or effort on discipline, even in classes with 50 or 60 students.

In Norway, this modeling and bonding between teacher and student has even more opportunity to take hold and flourish since primary school teachers typically stay with the same group of students for their first 5 or 6 years (Schmidt & Cogan, 2001). Russian students have reported similar experiences. In Lebanon, teachers are revered with a status nearing that of a prophet. Students are expected to memorize everything that is presented to them. Practical or creative applications of this knowledge or expressions of personal reactions to it are not encouraged (Kibbi, 1995).

According to McGroaty (1993), students from traditional educational systems may expect teachers to behave in a more formal, authoritarian manner. They may be displeased, puzzled, or even offended by an informal instructional style. These students are accustomed to a highly ordered pattern of classroom activity. When this is not the case, they may perceive the teacher as being poorly prepared or lazy.

Watkins (2000) delineates several learning modalities: surface, deep, and achieving. Surface learning is characterized by reading at a superficial level in order to memorize details and answer specific questions. Deep learning strives to understand underlying messages and meanings. Watkins describes the achieving approach as a student who strives to earn the highest grades by hard work and efficiency. Such a student would opt for whichever strategy (including surface vs. deep) they felt would maximize their chances for success. Watkins also reports that self-esteem, internal locus of control, and academic achievement have all been found to correlate with deep and achieving approaches to learning.
However, Watkins notes an apparent paradox: rote learning usually leads to poor learning outcomes. Since most Chinese students rely on memorization, one would predict poor learning outcomes; but, this is not the case at all. The paradox is resolved when we realize that even apparently clear terms like “memorization” have different meaning in different cultural contexts.

For Western students, repetition is used as a test of memory. Chinese students use repetition to deepen or develop understanding by discovering new meaning. For Western students, understanding results from sudden insight. Chinese see understanding as a long process that requires considerable mental effort. In the Chinese paradigm, teachers and students see memorizing and understanding as interlocking processes, not separate activities. Both are considered necessary for real learning to occur. This model appears to differ from the Haitian and Lebanese reliance on memorization, where deeper understanding does not seem to be stressed or to occur.

Understanding the use of memorization in this way also relates to the differences found in the classroom behavior of Chinese and Western students. Western teachers expect questions to be asked by students during the process of learning to fill in gaps in their knowledge, or to aid understanding. Chinese students ask questions after they have studied on their own. They believe that questions should be based on knowledge, and may consider Western classmates rude for asking questions based on their ignorance.

In a similar vein, British [and other Western] teachers believe that children learn through being creative, whereas Chinese teachers see the process the other way around. In China, teachers see creativity as a slow process that depends on solid basic knowledge (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998).

Not only do cultural differences exist in terms of when students should communicate in a classroom, there are also varying norms dictating how to communicate. In the United States, direct eye contact is interpreted as a sign of forthrightness. A lack of direct eye contact is often seen as a sign that a person is hiding something. However, in other cultures, direct eye contact is considered intrusive, inappropriate, and even shameful. In Asian countries, looking a teacher in the eye would be considered the height of disrespect. Not knowing this has caused some American teachers to assume some very odd postures as they “danced” with their students, alternately trying to make and avoid eye contact. Following a workshop on this topic, an English professor experimented with a new technique. After posing a question to her ESL students, she turned her face away. Interest in the answer was shown by tilting her head in the student’s direction and nodding as she walked around the room. The professor was delighted to report that the length and depth of the student’s response surpassed anything previously offered.
American teachers often encourage their students to respond passionately to a particular topic or issue, not realizing that in some cultures emotional expressions are considered inappropriate. Teachers often become frustrated by students who will not participate in classroom discussions, or speak so softly that they can barely be heard. Again, we may be looking at a cultural injunction—particularly if female students are involved and if both males and females are present. And, of course, each culture delineates what may or may not be discussed publicly at all. Even apparently innocuous topics can be problematic if their cultural implications are not known (Lankard, 1994; McGroaty, 1993). One student raised in the former Soviet Union recalled innocently questioning the war in Afghanistan. Her teacher’s retort was “We have a wonderful country. You are lucky to be here. Tomorrow you come to school with your parents.” [sic].

On a more personal level, many students suffered traumatic experiences prior to leaving their countries of origin. It is hard to know when a proposed topic may cause a student to recall these experiences and feel a psychological need to disengage from a class discussion or assignment.

Group work is also approached differently in different places. We are used to splitting the class into pairs, or small groups to work on a particular task or discuss an identified topic—what Watkins calls simultaneous pupil talk. In a Chinese classroom, one would be more likely to witness sequential pupil talk: two students at a time standing to engage in a (spontaneous or prepared) dialogue while the others listen and think about what their peers are saying. Watkins attributes the success of this practice in China to the moral training mentioned earlier: it is a student’s duty to listen well and to show respect to the teacher, other students, and the learning process itself.

The areas of testing, evaluation, and academic standards also reflect geographic variations. Students in many countries are accustomed to more rigorous academic standards (particularly in the sciences) and high-stakes testing, issues that are gaining much attention in the United States. Multiple choice tests, so common in America, are rare outside of the United States. Professors should be alert to the possibility that poor academic performance among ESL students might reflect lack of test-taking skills, rather than a lack of content mastery.

The Internet has been hailed as the great equalizer that would create unlimited equal access to information. The same technology has also been faulted for widening the gap between the have’s and have-not’s. Not surprisingly, cultural differences have been identified in this area as well. Joo (1999) comments that because the Internet promotes proactive teaching and learning, it may affect the balance of power in countries where the educational system is centralized and authoritarian. Students accustomed
to traditional methods may find it hard to adapt to active and innovative learning techniques. Until recently, China’s use of instructional technology was inadequate, due in part to cost, but also to the fear of an influx of undesirable information (Marlow-Ferguson, 2002). This is now changing. In conjunction with China’s overall economic development plans, by 2010 China will be the largest information technology (IT) market, outstripping even the United States (Li et al., 2001). IT courses have become a mandatory part of the curriculum, and universities are urging the use of IT for teaching and learning.

However, it has been noted that the Internet was first developed in Western, Anglo countries and remains heavily dominated by them. Joo posits that the Internet tends to reinforce the World Information Order; i.e., that information flows from industrialized to developing countries in ways that ultimately prove exclusionary to those from divergent cultures. Furthermore, research indicates that women are less likely to feel comfortable with, and confident in, their use of the Internet, particularly for learning purposes. They report greater difficulty finding their way around the internet and finding too much irrelevant information. Language difficulties are another barrier since most sites are still in English. Both Li and Joo call for attention to be paid to the cultural and linguistic obstacles that exist on the internet, and advocate cautious use of IT in education until these inequities are remedied.

Ultimately, the question becomes, how can the success of ESL college students be facilitated? Certain indications emerge:

1. Given the variances that exist in educational standards, it is important to recognize that not every student who has completed high school/secondary school possesses the level of literacy and language facility necessary for college work in their own language, let alone English.
2. Financial aid stipulations, Visa requirements, and other issues often force ESL students to enroll in credit-bearing classes before they are truly equipped to do so. Providing and encouraging students to utilize supportive services (i.e., tutoring) can be particularly important in this situation.
3. Discussion topics should be assigned judiciously. Teachers might want to be alert to indications that a particular topic may have inadvertently hit a nerve. Such signs would include verbal reticence or writer’s block in an otherwise involved and cooperative student.
4. Continuing lack of engagement may be symptomatic of the depression that often accompanies various stages of the immigration and acculturation process (Brilliant, 2000; Brilliant et al., 1995).
Consulting an ESL counselor and encouraging the student to do the same may be helpful.

5. Information technology should be incorporated into the syllabus cautiously, keeping in mind that some students may have had little or no previous experience with, or even access to, such technology. This lack of expertise is compounded by the cultural issues inherent to Internet usage mentioned earlier. With patience and support these students can be brought up to speed.

6. Asking for help is difficult for many students, particularly those from cultures where this is seen as a sign of weakness or failure. If it appears that a student is struggling, rather than waiting for them to seek help, it may be advisable to request, even insist, that he or she schedule a private consultation to discuss the situation. Depending on the circumstances, appropriate interventions might include providing academic assistance or appropriate referrals for counseling and/or tutoring, or other services.

In conclusion, investigating educational models, practices, and outcomes from various parts of the world can be very productive, both in terms of understanding our ESL students and in shaking up our own complacency. However, numerous authors (Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Shen, 2001) caution against the wholesale transport of any particular model or methodology, pointing out that successful practices are always embedded in a culture marked by a unique confluence of economic, political, social, and religious conditions. What works in one setting may be disastrous in another. Furthermore, these sociopolitical contexts themselves are also dynamic and changing. Indeed, students who were educated in the former Soviet Union often sound like they hailed from completely different countries, depending on whether they attended school before or after the policies of Perestroika and Glasnost were implemented.

Thus, as Dimmock and Walker state, in a globalizing world, recognizing societal culture and cross-cultural similarities and differences becomes more, not less important. Ideally, these authors envision each society transforming globalized policies and practices in culturally sensitive ways that respect the integrity of its own culture while allowing room for change and development. As college faculty, we have the opportunity to do just that. However, we need to avail ourselves of the knowledge our students can impart to us as we seek to guide and mentor them towards the deeper learning that is always more gratifying for the student and teacher alike.
REFERENCES


