Bridging the Gap Between Teaching Styles and Learning Styles: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Lixin Xiao
College of Foreign Languages
Nankai University
Tianjin, P. R. China
<xiaolixin2000@yahoo.com.cn>

Abstract

This paper investigates the nature of the mismatch caused by culture-based differences in perceptions and expectations of L2 teaching and learning style preferences between Irish English teachers and Chinese students. A survey was conducted which included a questionnaire, interview and class observation at two language institutes in Dublin, Ireland. The findings suggest the mutual awareness of the "cultures of learning" should be required. It is mutual responsibility to gain intercultural understanding so as to ensure effective teaching and learning outcomes. Teachers ought to develop awareness of their learners' culture of learning including their needs, wants, capacities, potentials and learning style preferences to meet learners' expectations and to foster their guided style-stretching. In the meantime, Chinese students also need to learn to develop sense of cultural sensitivity to reflect their own learning styles and strategy use to gradually adapt to the Irish school culture. Finally appropriate bridging strategies are recommended to native English-speaker teachers who are engaged in teaching Chinese ESL learners in their home institutions.

Introduction

Over the past seven years, the number of Chinese students going to Ireland to either learn English or to enter third-level education has risen to over 40,000. Most of the Chinese language students are high-school leavers with no prior overseas learning experience. Different teaching approaches in Chinese and Western cultures have created difficulties in classrooms for Chinese students in Ireland. Irish English teachers take a communicative approach and speaking is considered a vital aspect of language acquisition. Students are encouraged to speak and engage in discussions and debates with teachers and their peers. However, this may cause problems for Chinese students because Chinese "collectivist" culture sometimes causes a mismatch between Western teachers' teaching styles and Chinese students' learning styles in the

face of the Western "individualist" approach to teaching and learning. To reduce teacher-student style conflicts, some researchers in ESL/EFL profession advocate teaching and learning styles should be matched (cf. Smith & Renzulli, 1984; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Oxford et al., 1991).

As is evident below, many of the problems facing both Chinese students and Irish teachers in a culturally diverse classroom can be traceable to cultural differences. Hofstede (1986) states that interactions between teachers and learners from different cultures are fundamentally problematic and cross-cultural misunderstandings often occur because classroom interaction is an archetypal human phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the culture of a society (p. 303). Therefore, it is necessary for educators and practitioners to call upon cross-cultural awareness, appropriate pedagogical practice and intercultural communication skills to support the learning process.

Literature Review

Researchers have published works about the ways in which culture influences thought and behavior (e.g., Hofstede, 1986, 1991; Gudykunst, 1994; Samovar & Porter, 1995). They have made available a wide range of perspectives for conceptualizing the influences of different cultures on thinking and behaving. Three perspectives are of special potential relevance to L2/FL teaching: namely, the distinction between individualism and collectivism; different perceptions of power and authority; and different types of achievement motivation (cf. Littlewood, 2001). An individualist orientation encourages individuals to believe in their own unique identities; they are more likely to claim the right to express themselves, make personal choices, and strive for self-actualization. A collectivist orientation encourages individuals to see themselves as an inseparable part of the in-group; they expect and are expected to accord first priority to the views, needs, and goals of the group rather than "stand out" as individuals.

Many comparative studies of attitudes and values report that people in East Asian countries have emerged as showing a much stronger collectivist orientation (cf. Littlewood, 1999, p. 79), in which inequalities of authority and power are accepted as normal facts of life. In more individualist cultures, although differences of power exist in reality, there is a widely accepted ethos that emphasizes that they should in some way be minimized and their effects reduced. It is usually claimed that differences in power and authority are accepted most readily in more collectivist cultures. Two kinds of achievement motivation are often referred to. One kind is individually-oriented (success will satisfy personal goals and reach individual self-fulfillment). The other is socially-oriented (success will bring prestige or other benefits to others within the in-group). A more collectivist orientation is associated with a higher degree of socially-oriented motivation (cf. Yu, 1996; Yu & Yang, 1994).

Concerning classroom behaviors, it is not uncommon to find literature reviews that report that Asian students are passive learners and recipients of knowledge. Asian students are expected to show "total obedience or submission to their teachers," to be "passive receivers of knowledge," "they are not active in participating in tutorials and group discussions, and therefore to offer 'little input to the class'" (cf. Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Maley, 1984; Song, 1995; Liu, 1998). Therefore, "effectiveness of learning depends on excellence of teacher in class" (Hofstede, 1986, p. 313). Many

Asian students, according to Sue and Kirk (1972), are less autonomous, more dependent on authority figures, and more obedient and conforming to rules and deadlines (cited in Rao, 2001). "Asians go to great lengths to preserve not only their own face but everyone else's face" (Samovar & Porter, 1995, p. 230). Generalizations like these are so widespread that they tend to become stereotypes (Littlewood, 2001).

However, some EFL/ESL researchers hold different views (cf. Cheng, 2000; Littlewood, 2001; Xiao, 2005). Littlewood (2001) conducted a large-scale survey of students' attitudes towards classroom English learning in eight East Asian countries and three European countries. He found that most students in all countries question the traditional authority-based, transmission mode of learning. All students wish to participate actively in exploring knowledge and have positive attitudes towards working purposefully, in groups, towards common goals. His findings allow us to question some commonly held assumptions about the attitudes of Asian students. Cheng (2000) in his study argues that if Asian students are found in [English] class to be quieter than expected in certain circumstances, the causes are situation-specific rather than culturally pre-set (p. 435). For example, the possible causes might lie in the teaching methodologies used or the lack of required target language proficiency on learners' part. Some other studies support the similar assumptions (cf. Xiao, 2005).

Purpose of this study

There appears to be a lack of systematic and empirical research that may enable the voices of Chinese ESL students in Ireland to be heard and heeded. This pilot research investigates the mismatch caused by culture-based differences in perceptions and attitudes towards different language teaching and learning styles in classroom-based setting. It intends to identify student concerns and to provide some insights into how Chinese students have experienced learning and how they have perceived the communicative approach at their language institutes in Ireland. The Chinese language students' views, perceptions and comments, no matter how subjective and critical they might sound, will enable Western teachers to identify the gap between their espoused teaching principles and Chinese students' interpretation of them, as well as students' perceptions of their learning experience, to critically reflect upon their teaching practices (Li, 2004). Also dealt with in this study are bridging strategies that can help Western teachers to adjust their teaching styles to the needs of their Chinese students. This is particularly important for language institutes who may have up to 80% Chinese nationality students (Doyle, 2002). The Study

Subjects

Permission was obtained from two foreign language institutes in Ireland, one private and the other affiliated to a tertiary institution in Dublin, both of which had a relatively large number of Chinese students learning English at various levels. The student attendance was reported to be much better than in other language schools. Chinese students were randomly selected to answer a questionnaire. Forty-eight questionnaires were distributed and thirty-four were collected. Almost all the respondents were high-school leavers in their early twenties, and had been in Ireland for periods of time varying from six to twelve months. Eight Chinese students took part in the follow-up semi-structured interviews, which was designed to elicit more

detailed information not articulated in the questionnaire.

Methodology

In this study, the qualitative methods involving a questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observation were used. The questionnaire consisted of 41 questions written in Chinese and a 5-point Likert scale (For example, each student was asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with statements: 5. strongly agree; 4. agree; 3, neutral; 2, disagree; 1. strongly disagree).

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Attitudes Towards Speaking Out, Group Work, Teaching Methods and Teacher Authority in Class

Table 1. Questionnaire Items and Statistics, Part 1

Questionnaire items N=34	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I like to participate in group work consisting of 2-3 persons in class.	3.106	0.504
2. I like to be active and to speak English when I am working in a group.	3.122	0.704
3. I like teacher-centered teaching methods in English class.	2.987	1.012
4. I like student-centered teaching methods in English class.	3.025	0.718
5. I have enough confidence in improving my English to a desired level within 1 or 2 years in Ireland.	3.211	0.885
6. I expect my teacher rather than myself to be responsible for evaluating how much progress I have made in L2 learning.	3.032	1.036
7. When I am working in a group, I like to help keep the atmosphere friendly and harmonious.	4.016	0.730
8. In the classroom, I do not like to 'stand out' by voicing my opinions or asking questions.	2.437	1.030
9. In the classroom I see the teacher as somebody whose authority should not be questioned.	1.937	0.853
10. I work especially hard when my own success will benefit my close relations (e.g., my family) as well as myself.	3.787	1.014
11. I like activities in which I am part of a group when we are all working towards common goals.	3.937	0.853
12. Sometimes I feel nervous answering questions in class because I am afraid of being wrong.	2.625	0.957
13. I like to take part in group work with foreign students in a multicultural class.	3.875	0.957

14. I like to take part in group work with only Chinese students in the classroom, e.g. classroom discussion, role-plays.	2.812	0.834
15. I see knowledge as something that the teacher should pass on to me rather than something that I should discover myself.	2.183	0.841
16. I like to learn English in a small class consisting of 7-10 persons.	4.021	0.632
17. I like to learn English in a class consisting of Chinese learners only rather than in a multicultural class.	2.062	0.771
18. I expect my teacher to give oral explanations on written texts, e.g. TOEFL, IELTS.	3.625	0.885

The data from this study more or less reflect Chinese students' perceptions of their learning experiences in Ireland. Regarding group work in class (i.e., group discussion, role-play, and language games), the findings generally reveal that Chinese students showed mixed attitudes; about 50% students in the study wanted to be active in group work. It appeared that different students held different views about speaking out in class as well as about their learning experience in Ireland. Some interview accounts given by Chinese students reveal that some students did not seem to enjoy their study at the schools very much nor could they fully recognize the pedagogical value inherent in the communicative approach. The reasons are multifaceted. For instance, they thought that teachers seemed to spend too much time involving students in group discussions and games. Some students found such a teaching approach time-consuming and ineffective, since students would receive very limited "authentic" linguistic input in class. Some students argued that group work was organized "for very good students only."

Another reason for these perceptions is related to Chinese students' own beliefs about learning and teaching. A closer look at their interview accounts indicates that students were not accustomed to the communicative approach, which was deemed incompatible with their own conceptualization of what constitutes good learning and good teaching. The teaching methods used by Irish English teachers contrasted sharply to those in China where "the transmission style" of teaching is still popular (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Therefore, it is not surprising that students felt their learning needs and expectations were not fulfilled. While recognizing the good points of group work and participation, some students still pointed out that group activities were over-emphasized at the sacrifice of linguistic forms and structure. In addition, during interviews, students emphasized that some topics for interactive activities were uninteresting, beyond the scope of their intuitive knowledge, and incongruent with their cultural background. Even if they knew that the teacher's purpose was to encourage them to speak, they often found that they had little to talk about in such circumstances.

These findings reveal that while Chinese students in general held mixed attitudes towards the communicative approach, it seems that they still recalled the strengths inherent in teacher-centeredness, in which they could learn much more linguistic input from teachers in class. They claimed that adequate attention should be paid to both meanings and linguistic forms so as to meet their needs to pass the TOEFL or IELTS

examinations, required for enrollment of international students into tertiary institutions in Ireland. Moreover, classroom materials and the topics for group discussion should be carefully selected to stimulate Chinese students' interest and help them to express themselves freely without embarrassment when they make a mistake. The results also show that Chinese students preferred a small class mixed with students from other cultures to a homogeneous class consisting of Chinese students. They thought such mixed class would contribute to their linguistic skills and cross-cultural communication.

Moreover, the findings indicate that students did not rate teacher authority very highly in class. The results apparently seem to be incongruent with the reports in earlier studies that claim that teachers are perceived as a "fount of knowledge" from whom knowledge is transmitted to students, with Asian students--including Chinese learners--as "passive receivers of knowledge," as mentioned above.

The findings seem to indicate that a change in concepts of learning has been taking place, especially among those young people who have been exposed to Western culture via frequent personal communication, TV, films and so on. This change will, at least in principle, have an impact on their English language learning and classroom behaviors. Further examination reveals that Chinese students thought that respect for teachers was a basic attitude they should show in class. However, the students emphasized that only competent and considerate teachers would deserve sincere respect, whereas those teachers who poorly prepared their teaching and showed little care for students would not receive real respect from students. This indicates that while teacher authority is important to students, it also has to be won, not taken as given. This is similar to the Chinese equivalent of the English word respect (*Zun Jing*). Each of these two Chinese words has a separate meaning although, used in combination, they equate to respect in English. *Zun* means showing respect in action (body language or facial expressions), but at a surface level. The real respect derives from *Jing*, which means a kind of admiration from the bottom of one's heart. Therefore we can say that the justification of real respect is based on good quality of teaching performance and teacher's being considerate to students rather than a perceived unequal relationship between teachers and students in class.

A number of Chinese students expressed a strong desire that Irish English teachers should prepare their lessons and teach in a more coherent, systematic, and structured way. Students expected to be provided with a detailed systematic plan pertaining to the course provision and delivery to enhance mutual understanding between teachers and students. With regard to the confidence in improving their English to a desired level within one or two years in Ireland, it seems that most students were not very optimistic. They felt that they had made some--but not much--progress in their language skills. As for motivation, it seems that students are motivated by the sense of obligations to the family and to themselves. This finding supports the assumptions made in earlier studies. Littlewood (2001) describes Chinese college students in Hong Kong as having a typical social achievement motivation, characterized in a collectivist-oriented culture, that is, they are motivated to succeed because success would bring prestige and other benefits to their families. In China, it is a virtue to involve the value and interest of family with what one is pursuing.

Concerning voicing one's own opinions or asking questions in class, it is interesting to

note that most students indicate that they like to be active rather than passive or reticent L2 learners in class. Judging from this perspective, their apparent reticence in class as revealed in the follow-up classroom observations seems to be more related to their limited linguistic proficiency, instructional practice, textbooks, and topics rather than to the cultural traits as described above. The possible causes may be that the topics chosen for the group work in class are either beyond scope of their common cultural background or unconnected with their lives in Ireland or in China. Some students complained that the content of textbooks was not interesting to them and nor closely related to their needs. This problem could be exacerbated if their linguistic proficiency was not good enough to express themselves freely.

When asked if they would like to outperform their peers or maintain harmony in class or in group work, students' responses reveal they were more concerned about group harmony in class and tended to avoid "showing off." The findings indicated that more students seemed to feel comfortable speaking English in a smaller group as they viewed a smaller group as a more protective environment than speaking in front of the whole class. Linking the two items, we can find that the majority of students were concerned with maintaining group harmony, although some of them seemed to be more active than others in group work. This finding supports some other studies of Chinese student behavior, which reveal collective-oriented national cultural traits in the classroom (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Littlewood, 2001).

The findings also show that students often thought carefully before speaking English in class. This indicates that students surveyed tended to focus more on accuracy than on fluency, as this would help them avoid making mistakes or experiencing loss of face. The implication of this finding is that teachers should give students enough time to think actively before they speak while also encouraging quick and impromptu replies. In Chinese culture, being active in class does not necessarily mean getting physically involved in the classroom activities. Being mentally active also means being co-operative with the teacher and actively listening to the teacher (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Students seemed to be more concerned about their own linguistic accuracy or fearful of losing face, and which could result in speaking little in English class. This goes against communicative English language teaching principles, which emphasizes fluency over accuracy and focuses on students' involvement in classroom activities. The implication of this finding for teachers is that they should be aware of the fact that teachers need to create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom for their students to speak English.

Attitudes towards practice of Language Learning Strategy (LLS)

Table 2. Questionnaire Items (Part 2) Relating to Strategy Use

Questionnaire items N=34	Mean	Standard deviation
19. When I speak English in the class or in a group, I like to pre-plan my utterances rather than to speak spontaneously.	3.497	1.024
20. I make a plan of English study in addition to the homework assigned by my teacher.	2.769	0.926

21. I make a timetable for my studies in order to make sure that I have enough time to be devoted to learning English every day.	2.692	0.947
22. I have specific expectations on the progress I will make in improving my English in Ireland.	2.923	0.759
23. I evaluate my English progress so that I can discover weaknesses that I will overcome.	2.996	0.862
24. I evaluate my use of language learning strategies so that I can be aware of the problems I have in my learning process.	2.896	0.716
25. I use different language learning strategies appropriate to the specific learning task.	2.923	0.862
26. I select reading materials appropriate to my English level after class.	3.457	0.947
27. I analyze my personality traits and try to find out study-facilitating and study-hindering traits so that I know what I should do to cope with them or enhance them.	3.076	0.862
28. When I read English I intend to understand every detail of the text.	3.477	0.759
29. I read English texts many times after class.	2.011	1.154
30. I intend to analyse the grammatical structure of the sentence/text when I cannot understand it.	2.886	0.877
31. I recite large chunks of English texts that I think are well written.	2.307	1.125
32. I intend to understand every detail when I listen to English.	3.609	0.898
32. When I come across a new word while listening to English, I intend to learn by heart its pronunciation and try to look it up in a dictionary afterwards.	3.303	1.068
34. I read English newspapers, magazines and storybooks or internet information after class.	3.384	0.650
35. I often listen to English on the radio after class.	3.353	1.281
36. I like to initiate questions or answer questions in English class.	2.884	0.767
37. I see English films or watch TV after class.	3.6153	0.650
38. When my peers answer questions in class, I murmur the answer in English to myself.	2.846	1.214
39. I speak English with my friends or local native English-speaking people after class.	2.891	1.154
40. I often speak English to myself after class.	3.109	0.821
41. I keep a journal, take notes, and write letters in English.	3.307	1.031

The findings from this part of the questionnaire show that the students in this study

were not conscious users of meta-cognitive LLS, such as monitoring, planning, arranging and self-evaluating their own learning process, nor did they have a self-study plan to improve their language skills. They pointed out that this was related to their learning styles, which had been shaped by the way they learned English in China, where teaching English was geared towards the preparation for passing the nationwide university entrance examination. Obviously, this learning style is not appropriate in the Irish system, in which the emphasis is shifted from cognitive patterns to real use or practice of what they have learned inside and outside the classroom.

The findings also reveal that Chinese students seem to lack adequate knowledge of language learning strategies. It is important to note that good practice of LLS benefit learners' learning process if teachers make explicit their usefulness and benefits. Various studies suggest that successful L2 learners are characterized by conscious use of different LLS for various learning tasks (Rubin, 1975; Ellis, 1994; Wen, 1995). The encouraging findings of this survey are that students intended to do some after-class reading by selecting materials appropriate to their own English level. The findings also suggest that they realized the importance of learning English by using it. However, outside class, they tended to stick to a small circle of their Chinese peers in their accommodations where, for most students, limited meaningful oral communication in English took place. Another interesting finding in this survey is that even though students could realize to some degree the role that the strength and weakness that personality traits would play in their learning process, it seems that they did not know how to effectively cope with their weaknesses or to enhance their strengths.

Regarding form-based LLS, the results show that the students tended to focus on the comprehension of every detail while listening to English and looked up new words based on their pronunciation in a dictionary. This reflects their learning styles that focus more on accuracy than prediction or guessing based on the discourse. It is not surprising that such an accuracy-oriented rather than gist-centered learning style contradicts the communicative principles of CLT widely adopted by many Western teachers.

Discussion: Cultural Influence on L2 Education

As mentioned previously, the main causes of mismatch between teaching styles of native English-speaker teachers and Chinese students' learning styles may lie in the different perceptions of what constitutes good teaching and learning. This study shows that teacher-student style conflicts are likely to occur due to lack of intercultural awareness on part of teachers and students alike. The awareness of Western culture will facilitate learners' understanding and use of a second language. What is more important is student's native culture has influenced their perceptions of how a second language is learned and taught. It is worth noting that cultural influence on L2 education, in which Chinese students' learning styles have been conditioned, is deeply rooted, strong and persistent, though very often invisible. Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p. 74) use the term Chinese "culture of learning" to describe a whole set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, preferences, experiences, and behaviors that are characteristic of Chinese society with regard to teaching and learning. Cheng (2000) further summarizes the characteristics of

Chinese culture of learning. For instance, in China, teachers have absolute authority in classrooms. Students show great respect to teachers, but they also expect teachers to have thorough knowledge of the subjects they teach. Educational institutions have been under pressure from National Curriculum and matriculation systems that are usually exam-centered or knowledge-oriented. Due to the Chinese modesty or face-saving philosophy, many Chinese students do not consider asking questions in public a good habit. EFL classrooms in China often take the form of 'knowledge transmission' from teacher to students (Cheng, 2000, pp. 47- 48).

In other words, the "culture of learning" shapes the way a second language is learned and taught. If Western teachers are not aware of this, it would be often the case that when they find their teaching process problematic, students are to blame, and vice versa. In this sense, knowledge of the different perceptions, beliefs and values inherent in culture of learning will facilitate mutual understanding and contribute to effective teaching and learning outcome.

For instance, in Confucian tradition and values, a good teacher is supposed to be one who knows how to guide students without pulling them, how to steer students to go forward without suppressing them, and how to open the way for students to think for themselves (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Teachers are also role models for students in the Chinese educational system: *Jiao shu yu ren* (teaching books and cultivating students). A teacher should not only impart his or her knowledge to students but also cultivate good morals in order "to transform the young into people with a highly developed social conscience and to inculcate in them the code for living already accepted by their elders" (Hu & Grove, 1991, p. 79). The role of being a moral model inevitably leads to a teaching approach that asserts that effective teaching should be yan chuan shen jiao (teaching by personal example as well as verbal instructions). Such an approach is also known as *xiao zhi yi li, dong zhi yi qing, dao zhi yi xing* (to instruct with principles, move with emotions, and guide with teachers' own actions). Such a "personalized approach is believed to be more effective than mere verbal instructions" (Leng, 2005, p. 26). As such, teachers are expected to be knowledgeable, considerate, and play parental roles in the learning setting. In China "the teacher-student interaction is not lubricated with the democratic oil of warmth and first names, but with the oil of respect" (Biggs, 1998, p. 730).

As such, students might think their teacher somehow is deviating from his or her conventional functions by not being the focus of the class but being a "facilitator" or "coach." This is especially the case when a teacher's class management and presentation of text materials are found unsatisfactory, and topics for discussion are uninteresting. During the interviews conducted in this study, the students said that their teachers often showed little interest in anything except classroom teaching. This negative affective factor can influence student attitudes towards the learning process and constitute a negative "Pygmalion effect." In other words, a teacher's personality, knowledge level, and teaching methods, as well as his or her attitude and attention toward students, will affect students' attitudes toward and interest in his or her teaching in class. Chinese students, who have been conditioned by their previous cultural experiences in their own land, will show respect for their teachers and, in the meantime, expect their teachers to show a strong interest in them since the students see their teacher as the most reliable person to turn to for help based on their own previous experiences in China.

As mentioned previously, the survey findings also suggest that some knowledge of Chinese students' home country would be an important asset for Irish teachers. Unfortunately, in many cases this knowledge is missing. The author's follow-up classroom observation in this study confirmed this assumption. In English class, teachers made frequent reference to Western perspectives and inside knowledge that was often outside their Chinese students' experience. This would lead to reduction of interest in text materials, and contribute to anxiety, which will be compounded by their language deficiency. Of course, teachers expect their students to be engaged in interaction in class, and learn about Western culture. However, it is very helpful and necessary for teachers to have some basic knowledge of the culture their students are bringing into the classroom. It is worth noting that knowledge of culture-related differences in expectations on teachers and learners alike will be very helpful to meet learners' needs, to narrow the perceived mismatch and to achieve the aim of desired teaching and learning outcome.

Implications

The survey indicates that an understanding of Chinese "culture of learning" will help Western teachers to bridge the perceived mismatch confronting both Chinese students and Western teachers. Today, internationalization of education is an integral part of deepening global communication. In order to meet the challenges of the global marketplace, it is not appropriate for native English-speaker teachers to restrict the frame of reference to their own culture (Li, 2004). Cross-cultural understanding will help teachers avoid a narrow range of teaching approaches, which may become a barrier hindering them from adapting their teaching to learner needs and communicating successfully with Asian students. To ensure the desired outcome of teaching and learning, all participants, especially Western teachers, need to be aware of the impact of cultural influences upon learning and teaching so as to understand and cope with the difference and the issues which may lead to the teacher-student style conflicts in the learning setting.

Suggestions

Teachers need to free themselves from methodological dogmatism and cultural stereotypes and look for alternatives that blend the best practices from their own culture and the culture that their students are bringing with them into the classroom. Apart from the above-mentioned concepts, some bridging strategies are suggested here:

1. To alleviate the tension for the students, instructors should help them recognize the merit inherent in the communicative approach, be aware of the need to shift gradually from their previous learning models to communicative methods, thus adapting step by step to the Irish school culture. In the meantime, teachers should make explicit the usefulness of this adaptation. Teachers also need to diversify their teaching styles to meet Chinese learners' needs and classroom activity preferences, at least in the initial period. Ur (1996) argues that activities in class should be varied, and a varied lesson plan is more likely to cater to a wide range of learning styles and strategies.

2. Teachers need to adapt classroom materials to make them user-friendly for

Chinese students and to help them to express themselves freely without feeling embarrassed when they make mistakes. Another suggestion is to use class materials that are not purely culture-based, such as television advertisements or soap operas, or Western pop idols.

3. Teachers often use video and film to enrich learners' target cultural knowledge. Videos and films can also contribute to the development of schemata in learners' minds, which might enable learners to retain the information learned longer, and therefore serve as a more effective means to broaden their knowledge about target culture. One of the advantages of using videos/films as a teaching tool is that they may function as a springboard, leading to a variety of meaning-focused speaking and writing activities in class. As such, video or film would lend itself well to the meaning focused communicative approach and hence stimulate learners' enthusiasm for the communicative approach. In this process, teachers need to provide learners with proper scaffolding in order that learners will understand the content and be prepared for follow-up activities. Moreover, enough attention should be paid to the design and activities appropriate for a specific video or film. For instance, Zhou and Miao (1996 cited in Song, 1998, p. 143) suggest three-stage activities for a video/film lesson.

    - Pre-watching stage: to arouse learners' interest, activate their schemata and provide a purpose for watching. At this stage, classroom activities focus on prediction of content, vocabulary, introduction of background information, asking questions.
    - While-watching stage: activities focus on true or false questions, sequencing of events, which should be simple and easy so as not to interfere with the watching process.
    - Post-watching stage: to reflect an integrated approach to develop four target language skills through meaning-focused tasks, such as group or pair discussion based on the given questions, role play, writing of summary, reinventing the ending, or asking students to add an ending to the story being watched, reading reviews or other related literature.

4. Good rapport also needs to be built between teachers and learners. In China, a good relationship between teachers and students is very important to keep harmony and show respect for teachers from students--a sort of "family relationship" that places emphasis on respect, harmony, and caring. If teachers are concerned about nothing but teaching English in the classroom, students might feel disappointed when they face this style of relationship. With such awareness, if both teachers and students can blend the strengths from their own cultural orientations and exchange ideas, the teacher-student style mismatch will be identified and then dealt with effectively.

Conclusion

To reduce teacher-student style conflicts is not easy, but also not impossible when teachers are aware of their learners' needs, wants, potentials, and learning style preferences in order to use appropriate pedagogical methods to meet them. Teachers should consider culture-related style differences as they plan how to teach, and make a conscious effort to include various learning styles in their daily lesson plans.

Minimizing the perceived mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation will facilitate the chances of achieving desired learning outcomes (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). The findings also demonstrate that teachers can use instruments to identify students' needs, including classroom activity preferences, develop self-aware learners, encourage changes in students' behavior, and "foster guided style-stretching" (Rao, 2001). In other words, teachers ought to rely more often on informed assessment of learners' needs and preferences than on unaided intuitions when making course planning decisions. In so doing, Western teachers can assist Asian learners, Chinese learners in particular, in becoming more effective L2 learners and in making their study in Ireland not only more successful but also more enjoyable.

Recommendation for Further Study

As the number of the subjects in this study is limited, the findings might not be fully representative for all the Chinese ESL learners in Ireland. However, the goal of this study is not to generalize its findings but to provide Western English language teachers with insights into teaching Chinese ESL learners more effectively in Western contexts. However, some questions require further research. For example, how and to what extent and does the culture of learning affect Chinese ESL learners' communication with teachers in Western contexts?

About the Author

Xiao Lixin obtained his PhD in Second Language Education at Dublin City University, Ireland. He is currently associate professor of second language acquisition at Nankai University, China where he teaches in the MA program of Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition. His research interests include classroom-based research, communicative language teaching, task-based learning and teaching, critical thinking in L2/FL education and intercultural communication studies.

References

An, S. D. (2002). Differences in participation between Asian learners and Western learners in ELICOS classrooms. *Teaching English in China*, *12* (4), 29-34.

Biggs, J. (1998). Learning from the Confucian heritage: So size doesn't matter? *International Journal of Educational Research, 29*, 723-738.

Bradley, D., & Bradley, M. (1984). *Problems of Asian students in Australia*: *Language, culture and education*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Cheng, X. T. (2000a). Asian studentsâ€™ reticence revisited. *System 28*, 435-446.

Cheng, X. T. (2000b). Culture of learning and ELT in China. *Teaching English in China, 23* (1), 47-48.

Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1996). English teaching and learning in China. *Language*

Teaching 29 (2), 61- 80.

Doyle, D. (2002). Teaching English to the Chinese--Bridging the cultural gap. http://www.dcu.ie/news/press/2002/p0602a.shtml. Retrieved10 March, 2003.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gudykunst, W. B. (1994). *Bridging differences: Effective inter-group communication (2ⁿᵈ Edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hofstede, G. (1986). Cultural differences in teaching and learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10,* 301- 320.

Hofstede, G. (1991/ 1994). *Cultures and organisations*: *Intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival - Software of the mind*. McGraw-Hill International Limited.

Hu, G. W. (2002). Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of communicative language teaching in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 15* (2), 93-105.

Leng, H. (2005). Chinese cultural schema of education: Implications for communication between Chinese students and Australian educators. *Issues in Educational Research, 15* (1), 17-36.

Li, M. S. (2004). Culture and classroom communication: a case study of Asian students in New Zealand language schools. *Asian EFL Journal*, March 2004. http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/march_05_dg.php. Retrieved Feb. 6, 2005.

Littlewood, W. (2001). Students€™ attitudes to classroom English learning: A cross-cultural study. *Language Teaching Research, 5* (1), 3-28.

Liu, D. L. (1998). Ethnocentrism in TESOL: Teacher education and the neglected needs of international TESOL students. *ELT Journal, 52* (1), 3-10.

Liu, N. F. & Littlewood, W. (1997). Why do many students appear reluctant to participate in classroom learning discourse? *System*, *25* (3), 371-384.

Maley, A. (1984). Reconciling communicative with traditional approaches to language teaching: Can it be done? *Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 57* (1), 42-48.

Oxford, R. (1996). Why is culture important for language learning strategies? In R. Oxford (Ed.), *Language Learning Strategies Around the World: Cross-cultural Perspective* (pp. ix-xv). Manoa: University of Hawaii Press.

Oxford, R. (1992/1993). Language learning strategies in a nutshell: Update and ESL suggestions. *TESOL Journal*, 2 (2), 18-22.

Oxford, R., Ehrman, M, & Lavine, R. (1991). Style wars: Teacher-student style conflicts in the language classroom. In S. Magnan (Ed.), *Challenges in the 1990's for College Foreign Language Programs* (pp. 1-25). Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.

Rao, Z. H. (2001). Matching teaching styles with learning styles in East Asian contexts. *The Internet TESL Journal,* Vol. VII, No.7, July 2001. http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Zhenhui-TeachingStyles.html. Retrieved Oct. 21, 2003.

Rubin, J. (1975). What the good language learner can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly, 9,* 41-51.

Samovar, L. A. & Porter, R. E. (1995). *Communication between cultures (Second Ed.).* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Smith, L. & Renzulli, J. (1984). Learning style preference: A practical approach for classroom teachers. *Theory into Practice,* 23 (1), 45 -50.

Song, M. L. (1998). Maximizing the value of video in ELT in the Chinese context. *Teaching English in China, 31*, 141-144.

Song, B. (1995). What does reading mean for East Asian students? *College ESL, 5* (2), 35-48.

Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*: *Practice and theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wallace, B., & Oxford, R. (1992). Disparity in learning styles and teaching styles in the ESL Classroom: Does this mean war? *AMTESOL Journal, 1*, 45-68.

Wen, Q. F. (1995). *yinyyu xuexi chenggongzhe yu buchenggongzhe zai fangfa shang de chayi* [Differences in learning styles between successful and unsuccessful EFL learners], *Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu [Foreign Language Teaching and Research] 3*, 61-66.

Xiao, L. X. (2005). Do we reliably know what EFL students like in English classrooms at university level? *The Journal of Asia TEFL,* 2 (3), 67-94.

Yu, A. B. (1996) Ultimate life concerns, self, and Chinese achievement motivation. In M, Bond (Ed.), *Handbook of Chinese Psychology* (pp. 227-246). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Yu, A. B. & Yang, K. S. (1994). The nature of achievement motivation in collectivist societies. In U. Kim., H. C. Triandis., C. Kagitcibasi., S. C. Choi., & G, Yoon (Eds.), *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method and Applications* (pp. 239-250). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.