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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

A narrative inquiry into foreign teachers' perplexes in mixed-cultural classes

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Abstract: Mixed-cultural classes, a foreign teacher teaching Chinese students, are common now in China. These mixed-cultural classes provide an educational context where there are chances of direct intercultural contact and deeper understandings of the cultural other, and also misunderstandings and even conflicts between teachers and students from different cultures. This study conducted a research by narrative inquiry on what perplexes some foreign teachers experienced while teaching Chinese students. Semi-structured interviews were used among several teachers at Harbin Institute of Technology, whose account of their experienced perplexes were categorized through thematic analysis. Some perplexes were generalized as “the silence of students in class”, “problem of punctuality”, “not complaining to foreign teachers directly”, “no respect from Chinese students,” and “plagiarism”, which might cause misunderstandings of the foreign teachers toward Chinese students, some of them leading to conflicts of a certain degree. Different educational perceptions might be the causes of these conflicts in mixed-cultural classes. Teachers should understand their own teaching styles, adjust their teaching styles to accommodate the diverse teaching styles of their students in order to create a more viable educational environment.



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The current study, “A Narrative Inquiry into Foreign Teachers’ Perplexes in Intercultural Classes”, based on the author’s own research interest and previous research accomplishments, integrates the author’s research interests in English language teaching and intercultural communication studies.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Intercultural classes are common now in China, which means foreign teachers are working in universities, high schools, teaching Chinese students English language. Because foreign teachers and Chinese students have different ideas about how teachers and students should do in class, there are misunderstandings and even conflicts between foreign teachers and Chinese students. In order to understand why those misunderstandings and conflicts occur, this study conducted a research by asking some foreign teachers who are teaching English to Chinese students to reflect on what problems they have met when they were teaching. Some common problems were generalized as “the silence of students in class”, “problem of punctuality”, “not complaining to foreign teachers directly”, “no respect from Chinese students,” and “plagiarism”. These teachers also talked about what they thought as the causes of these problems and offered some suggestions to solve these problems.

Subjects: Bilingualism/ESL; Classroom Practice; Higher Education; Multicultural Education

Keywords: mixed-cultural classes; educational perceptions; confucian discourse; socratic discourse; foreign teachers; perplexes; English language teaching; Chinese universities

1. Introduction

“Even to an old, experienced, integrationist, open-classroom teacher, multicultural education presents problems” (Perry & Fraser, 1999). When teachers and students from different cultures come into the same classroom, a multi-cultural or a mixed cultural classroom context is created, where teachers and students will be faced with some, if not all, differences in classroom behaviors, toward which they have different attitudes and feelings. If these attitudes and feelings go toward two extremes, misunderstandings and conflicts will result, and even culture shock might occur when one has expectations of one behavior and gets something completely different (Carol, 1986).

With the increase of exchange programs between Chinese and international universities around the world, mixed-cultural classrooms are becoming common, where foreign teachers teach native students or native teachers teach foreign students. These mixed cultural classes have not only brought direct intercultural contact and new understanding between teachers and students, but also created misunderstandings and even conflicts between teachers and students, as a result of differences between Chinese and westerners in educational concepts or values. This paper will focus on the English learning class where teachers are foreigners and learners are Chinese.

Now there is a trend of foreign teachers migrating to Asia in order to teach English and a prevalence of mixed-cultural classes. This study would be revealing some perplexes which some foreign teachers experienced during their teaching to Chinese students, which would be of significance to foreigner teachers, since there is potential to explore how teachers and students from different cultures can cope with each other well in their language teaching and learning process.

2. Literature review

2.1. “Traditional” perceptions of Confucian and Socratic

Due to the original reasons and historical development in the east and west, the philosophy of educations are different, resulting in differences in concepts of education, goals of education, methods of educations, roles of teachers and students. Scollon (1999) used the terms “Confucian discourse” and “Socratic discourse” to distinguish the Chinese and Western perceptions of education.

2.2. Traditional perceptions of Confucian

In the Confucian perception, the education focuses on the knowledge to accumulate and indoctrinate, on how students use and manage the knowledge they learned in school and on how to understand the knowledge system and structure.

These traditional beliefs 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 quite orderly arranged seats in the classroom, all facing the teacher, focusing only on the teacher.

The Chinese traditional education method is a type of education in which people repeat what the book says and imbue the child with it. It emphasizes mechanical memorizing. Chinese believe the best learning way is through memorization and repeated practice (Biggs, 1992; Ho, 1993; Liu, 1984). Thus repeated homework, quizzes and examinations are most frequently employed ways by

teachers. And to some extent, Chinese education is examination education, since the examination-oriented education dominates all stages of learning, from primary school to colleges (Liu, 1984).

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* (Chen, 1990, 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 about the teacher's knowledge and argue with the teacher.

The classroom discourse in China is more oriented toward 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 the most holy 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.

2.3. Traditional perceptions of Socratic

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 (Scollon, 1999). Therefore, western education cares more about how students use knowledge in society. It lets student challenge the knowledge, animadvert ideas, and focus on, exploit or create knowledge (Scollon, 1999). So, 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.

In the Socratic tradition, 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. Moreover, 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. In the western classroom, regardless of the age and the social status of the teacher, 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. No one will have the sense of being less respected in this case.

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 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.

Therefore, when teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds come into the same classroom, due to their different educational concepts, different ways of conducting education and different beliefs about function of education, about teachers and students, they would surely face misunderstandings, which might lead to conflicts. It is of importance for teachers and students to learn about these differences, their resulted misunderstanding and the consequent conflicts, so that they can overcome the obstacles in their teaching and learning and achieve ideal results of foreign language study.

2.4. Mixed-cultural classes

With growing presence of international students, classes are becoming more mixed-culturalized across nations in the world. There are classes where a native teacher teaches some foreign students, or where a foreign teacher teaches some native students. There are also classes in which students come from various cultural backgrounds and the teacher is also a culture-other. In these classes, we can find diversity in the cultural experiences of students and teachers, whose various cultural experiences provide divergence in their frames of reference, or the ways in which individuals understand communication in the classroom (Johnson, 1996).

Since China's opening to the world in 1980s, more international teachers were to be employed to teach, mainly the language course, not excluding subject courses, first mostly in universities, and now extended into kindergartens. Foreign teachers from America, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Singapore, France, Germany, etc. are all to be found in language classes in China. This is the typical mixed-cultural class where a foreign teacher from a culture-other teaches home students from China.

In this study, the mixed-cultural class chosen as the research context is the mixed-cultural class with a foreign teacher and home-students, that is, the teachers are from overseas and they are teaching English as a foreign language to Chinese students in the schools of China.

2.5. Perplexes faced by teachers in a mixed-cultural classroom

When students and teachers who were brought up in their own traditional educational environment, with deep rooted concepts in educational philosophy, methods of education, perception of teachers and students, and their relations, etc. come across with teachers and students with different norms of classroom discourse, discrepancies are present, then problematic classroom communication is likely to occur. This can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts either from the perspective of teachers or that of students (Brooke, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). Fan (2006) found that there exist differences in terms of cognition style, teaching style, and learning style. Conflicts between foreign teachers and Chinese students were observed to include followings: different attitudes to text books, to teacher-students relations and to teaching styles (Duan, 2009). Yan (2001) found that foreign teachers talk more based on their own experiences rather on the textbooks which might make Chinese students feel at loss. Foreign teachers offer students more chances to discuss and find the answers by themselves which make the students complain why the foreign teachers do not teach more in class. Foreign teachers are thought to be more arbitrary in selecting teaching materials. In an oral class, 41% of students thought their foreign teacher was very arbitrary in organizing the oral class (Yan, 2001). Conflicts also arise due to the test forms. Foreign teachers prefer evaluating students accumulatively according to students' performance in class, and some Chinese students complain about this to be too subjective (Zhou, Wang, & Wang, 2004). There are also conflicts arising because Chinese students sometimes ask their foreign teachers some private questions, like their age, marriage status, income, etc. (Luo Xiaoling, 2009). Some major problems foreign teachers came across while teaching Chinese students are caused by students' poor language proficiency level, poor language output capability (Xiaoling, 2009). Xion (2013) stated that class conflicts present as a result of behavior and psychology, revealed in their behaviors, oral arguments, etc. Conflicts also present as a result of differences in values, religions, educational systems, and political systems (Li, 2013; Lin, 2006).

Now foreign teachers are employed from kindergarten level to higher education level across China. Foreign teachers from different schools teaching different students might have encountered different problems and conflicts. This study will take Harbin Institute of Technology as the research context, and some teachers from this university as the subjects, so as to find out what exactly foreign teachers teaching at higher education institutions might experience as problems and conflicts, and how they tried to solve them.

3. Method

This study will try to explore what problems foreign teachers come across when they are teaching Chinese students. The study was conducted at Harbin Institute of Technology, which is a high rank university in China, where many foreign teachers are employed. The students taught by these foreign teachers include those English majors, non-English majors, and some high school students.

This study was conducted by narrative inquiry, a research method by which participants told stories about their practical teaching experiences and reflected upon those problems and how they solved them, simply a way of thinking about life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By this way, we can learn what exactly those teachers have experienced in their teaching practice.

3.1. Instrument

A semi-structured interview questionnaire with several open questions was designed by the researcher for collection of raw data, personal information, such as length of teaching English in China, subjects taught, etc. is needed in the first part, and a consent form to participate this research was signed by every participant. The open questions are as below:

- (1) Any problems/troubles/misunderstandings/conflicts occur in your class between you and your students?
- (2) What do you think are the possible reasons?
- (3) What did you do about these problems?
- (4) What advice would you like to give to other teachers?
- (5) Any other whatever suggestions or comments?

3.2. Participants

Participants of the study are six foreign teachers, teaching at Harbin Institute of Technology, one teacher doing part time teaching at International Studies Center of Harbin No. 3 High School. Table 1 summarizes the personal information about the subjects (see Appendix I), such as name, age, gender, nationality, the name of the university, years of teaching, years of teaching the intercultural class, student number, etc. (They were referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, as their remarks were quoted in the paper).

3.3. Data collection

Semi-structured interview questionnaires were delivered to participants who were given as long as three months to write their narrations: a way of fictionalization (storying and restorying (Wei & Chen, 2016)). These narrations were taken as the raw data. First, they were read together by the author and another teacher as a rater in identifying those categories of problems, then irrelevant or redundant information were separated from which will be eventually analyzed by using Labov's thematic organization or Synchronic Organization approach. The author and the co-researcher identified the following three categories of contents: what problems are there, what causes these problems, and what suggestions are proposed. Second, the problems were categorized into different types. Totally, 21 stories were provided by the 6 teachers, 18 of them were complaints of some problems, and 3 were actually not problems, but some happy experiences. They were generalized as problems in terms of (1) Classroom behavior (such as silence in class, no respect from Chinese students, not punctual in handing in homework, no long-term plan, changing timetable all the time, keeping others waiting, not talking to teacher directly); (2) pragmatic and linguistic incompetency (not understanding teacher's use of phrases, not understanding idioms and some terms); (3) academic behavior (plagiarism), and (4) teacher-students relationship which are actually some positive experiences, as seen in Table 2 (see Appendix II).

4. Discussion

The identified problems and conflicts, as well as some suggestions regarding how to deal with these problems were discussed in the following sections by quoting statements from the narrations of the participants.

4.1. Problems in classroom behavior

In terms of classroom behavior, we summarized “silence in class”, “no respect from Chinese students”, “not punctual in handing in homework”, “no long term plan”, “changing timetable all the time”, “keeping others waiting” and “not talking to teacher directly” under this category.

4.1.1. “Silence in class”

The first problem “silence in class” refers to students’ reluctance to speak or to participate in oral activities, which dominates all problems, supported by five stories. Four participants talked about students’ reluctance to speak in their classes. That is when the teacher organized some oral activities in class, the responses to teachers’ requirement are “just stare at me or at each other” (P4), “one student was refusing to use English” (P5), “blank stares from students” (P3), or “students may feel like they are just playing games” (P4).

Reasons given by the participants for these problems are concluded as simply as “lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes” (P4); “fear of losing face” (P1); “many students are embarrassed to speak in English during class because they feel that their ability is sub par and they will make a mistake during class” (P4), etc. Furthermore, “because it is such a test based society in education, especially language, students seem to only want to say the “right” answer and if they don’t know what the exact answer is, they are hesitant to answer at all” (P4). Other reasons could be that “students traditionally are waiting for the teacher to impart knowledge upon them instead of being willing and knowing how to search for answers on their own” (P4). This can be interpreted as “a result of past education experiences for students” (P4). Chinese students are used to the teaching style where “their Chinese professors would not ask them questions and would only give lectures and students seldom ask questions in class because it was not polite to ask a teacher a question, or it could be interpreted as that the teacher did not do a good enough job teaching” (P3).

Conflicts following the reluctance of students to speak or participate in oral communication activities arise between the foreign teacher and Chinese students. First, it “makes it hard for teachers to even know what to do to take students to higher level thinking in the classroom if they are inexperienced in the culture and mixed-cultural classroom”(P4). Second, it “makes it difficult for the students because they are unsure of what they should be doing with the teacher and may feel very uncomfortable with the teacher asking these difficult questions” (P4), or “students sometimes feel they aren’t actually learning anything or maybe don’t place as much value on the foreign teachers courses because they are just playing games in the classroom” (P4). This can be very discouraging for teacher as well as students. Moreover, it “make the teacher feel like they are doing something wrong or to misjudge the students’ actual language level” (P4). The “reluctance to speak in oral classes might become worsened into a mechanical oral task, meaningless talk, and has lost the significance of doing this oral task of exchanging ideas. Students would just state their points of view without listening to others or adding to each others’ ideas. There was no reciprocating of ideas” (P4).

More serious conflicts do arise from this seemingly simple “reluctance to speak” (P1): One story described that one instance was that when the teacher asked the student to speak, the student “flat-out refused and even said, ‘No’.” So, the teacher asked him to leave and he promptly left. And the foreign teacher felt quite uncomfortable about this. “I felt that I would have lost all authority as a teacher if I hadn’t punished him for refusing a directive in class. If memory serves, he did come back to class a few times that semester and ended up with an average grade. I didn’t expect that sort of thing to happen, given my assumptions about how students in China typically treat their teachers in classrooms” (P1).

Silence in class poses a problem to foreign teachers but not to Chinese teachers because of the differences between China and America in terms of teaching and learning cultures, concepts and conducts in education, beliefs in roles of teachers and students, etc. It is normal for Chinese students to keep more silence in class instead of more talking in accordance with the traditional Chinese learning cultures, the role of student, etc. “Sometimes silence may show the listener’s respect for the speaker” (Song, 2007). While “in the West, because we have a high emphasis on communication in the classroom when learning language, we place a high value on actually using language in the classroom” (P4).

Realizing these problems, the participants could work out some strategies to accommodate the Chinese students. They either tried their best to remedy the situation by “being supportive and try to explain that everything will be fine” or by “adding in more direct applications of grammar and vocabulary so students are able to see how the activities they are doing are directly practicing some language focus” (P4), since “Chinese students are used to the style of classroom that they grow up in which emphasizes drills, rote repeating, and grammar exercises” (P4). Some teachers would try to encourage students to speak by telling them mistakes are welcomed in language learning, or they would “write the objectives for the lesson on the board for students to see as well as explain them to students so they can be more aware of the reasoning and value behind the various activities they are performing in class” (P4).

What the participants had done to solve those problems really took effects, such as “I have found that part of this (students’ silence) is hard to fix in the intercultural classroom, but can be slightly improved” (P4); “slowly but surely they are coming around and more and more of my students in China are starting to ask me questions and answer my questions in class” (P3).

4.1.2. “No respect from students”

Another problem has to do with the teacher–student relationship: no respect from Chinese students to the foreign teacher, which was mentioned in three stories by two participants. One case was that a student expressed his dissatisfaction with the slow progress of the lesson resulted from the technical problem just before the teacher (P1). Another case was that the participant was asked to switch the classroom in the midst of explaining a dilemma to the other teacher’s students, one of my students jumped up to say to them (as the teacher was walking in) that they would be happy to switch with them without asking the participant’s permission, which annoyed the participant very much (P1). In the third case the participant mentioned that “we often can feel disrespected in the classroom as students will leave in the middle of a class to talk on the phone, send text messages, receive a parcel, or not listen alertly as other students present in front of the class” (P4).

The most serious consequence of these problems is that the foreign teachers feel being insubordinate, or “feel like the proverbial foreigner getting run over by the culture truck on a street where local teachers (or perhaps just older and well-respected ones) had needs which superseded my own” (P1).

One teacher explained the reason for this conflict is that “though the students do in deed respect me and other foreign teachers in our role, their ideas of respect are often different than ours in the West. In the West, giving eye contact, not leaving during class, not texting in class; these things are ways we give our teachers respect. I would never dream of leaving class while a teacher was teaching unless it was an absolute emergency” (P4). “Throughout my time in China, I have realized that the idea of ‘respecting a teacher’ is different than I first expected. I always had heard that China has a great respect for its teachers. I have seen that in many ways. However, as foreign teachers, we often can feel disrespected in the classroom” (P4).

This conflict might result from the over-expectation of the foreign teachers of the Chinese students in terms of the relationship between Chinese teachers and students, since it is well known that the classroom discourse in China is more oriented toward a hierarchical face system, assumes more

respect from students toward the teacher. The relationship between teachers and students in China is like that of between parents and children. Therefore, the western teachers would already have a stereotype of the relationship and usually the stereotype would be easily over-exaggerated, and so when they came to the Chinese classroom, their highly expected stereotypes would be more easily challenged.

What this participant advised to other teachers who had the similar problem was to "demonstrate clearly that there are consequences for outright insubordination; otherwise, one might lose authority in his classroom" (P1).

4.1.3. "Not punctual in handing in assignment"

Some problems mentioned by the participants are relating to the class behavior concerning the time concept.

One is that students do not hand in their assignments on time, which is a problem for foreign teachers. "No matter how I emphasized in my class that all homework must be handed in on a certain date, there would always be some students who would be late" (P6). What the teacher did about this late handing in is that "any homework that is turned in late will receive a score of zero. I will still give feedback and correct the assignment, but the student will not receive credit for it" (P3).

This caused a conflict between the teacher and students who felt that the teacher was punishing them by taking off their points on their assignments. Confronting this conflict, the teacher would "constantly tell my students that my job is to teach them English, not to take off points on their assignments" (P5).

This conflict results from the different concepts of time and the rules that govern its use. The ways Chinese and Americans perceive time, structure time, and react to time are different. America is considered as monochronic society, where Americans maintain a strict monochronic orientation to time which means that things are done one at a time and time is segmented into precise, small units (Chen & Yan, 2012). Under this system time is scheduled, arranged, and managed. They have schedules that they must follow, and they keep strict to the schedules. On the other hand, China is a more polychronic orientation to time, which means the cultures of China are normally collective and deal with life in a holistic manner, having less formal perception of time and people are not ruled by precise calendars and schedules. Moreover, Chinese culture is more focused on relationships, rather than watching the clock. They are used to being "late" for an event and this is not regarded as offensive by Chinese as by Americans (Chen & Yan, 2012).

With these experiences, the participant would suggest that "it is important for teachers to clearly state expectations and then to stick with them regardless of student behavior (barring extreme situations) (P5)".

Actually this suggestion was learned from other teachers who had already had some teaching experiences in China with Chinese students: "during my teacher training, I was told that it is extremely important to set classroom rules and expectations during the first day of class. I found this to be very true" (P5). Therefore, it is necessary for those foreign teachers to get some training in teaching in Chinese context, to help them to learn more about Chinese way of teaching and learning.

4.1.4. "No long term plan", "changing timetable all the time", "keeping others waiting"

Several other stories concerning the concepts of time are "no long term plan" (P6), "changing timetable all the time" (P6), "keeping others waiting" (P6). In the story of "no long term plan" (P6), the participant complained that it was always to the last minute that he could know the arrangement for the vacation that he could not book his flight longer ahead, and this would cost him much money to book the nearer flight. In the story of "changing timetable all the time", the participant mentioned that he had to make changes in his timetable all the time because the school was making changes

according to some other teachers' need. And in the story of "keeping others waiting", the participant mentioned that he was taking the same car to work and home and he would always wait for the other teacher who was superior to him in school and this made him annoyed very much. These stories were about dissatisfaction with the school or the teachers, and these stories add more evidence to the cultural differences in terms of punctuality, or the concepts of time, which lead to some different practices performed by the administrative personnel, the teachers, and students.

4.1.5. "Not talking to teacher directly"

One participant mentioned that when he first came to teach in China, he noticed that his students would like to tell their Chinese teachers about those dissatisfactions with him rather than talking to him directly. He later told the students that if they had any suggestions to him regarding his teaching, they could tell him directly, but still no student would talk to him directly and kept talking to their Chinese teachers and the Chinese teachers would then come to talk to him (P6). Many times of doing this annoyed him very much. He later became very angry about this and refused to listen to the Chinese teachers about any feedbacks from the students. He really could not understand why the Chinese students would rather talk to their Chinese teachers than talk to him directly.

This conflict was attributed to possibly students' low linguistic proficiency, that is they worry that they cannot explain their problems clearly to the foreign teacher, or because in their mind, there is difference between a teacher (Chinese) who is in charge of them and teacher who is teaching them, which is the special phenomenon in China, that there is a teacher in charge for every class, who would be relied on in every aspects.

4.2. Students' pragmatic and linguistic incompetence

Problems sometimes were due to students' pragmatic incompetency or low level of linguistic competence.

4.2.1. "Not understanding teacher's use of phrases"

Many problems that foreign teachers experienced were due to students' pragmatic incompetency. For example, students would have difficulty in understanding the pragmatic meaning of "have a great day", or "see you next week" which are indicating that the teacher is closing the class when the utterance is used at the end of the class. "When I was finished teaching, I would say many different things like "Have a great day", "See you next week", etc. None of these responses worked. Only when I said, "Class dismissed", would the students get up and leave" (P3).

We would attribute this problem to cultural differences in terms of pragmalinguistic uses of language, or social linguistic inappropriateness. In Chinese classroom discourse, it is a routine for students to stand up at the beginning of the class when the teacher enters the classroom and exchange a courteous greeting to the teacher to show respect to him, and at the end of the class to say goodbye to the teachers, in very formal way. On the other hand, in a western classroom discourse, teachers would behave less formally by performing the formal courteous routines.

The participant could work out a solution to the above problem by explaining to the students that, "at the end of my first class each semester I will not say class dismissed but will say see you next week. Now they understand that class has ended" (P3).

4.2.2. "Not understanding idioms and some terms"

Another problem comes from the student's not being able to understand the teachers when the teachers use idioms and colloquialisms, which can be generalized as students' lack of linguistic competence, which are a big challenge to students, due to the cultural elements connotated in these idioms and colloquialisms.

The conflict led by this problem is that there are misunderstandings between students and their teachers in terms of each other's culture connotated in their language use. English idioms and colloquialisms are the difficult parts for Chinese students, since they are heavily cultural-loaded. Without understanding these languages, students would understand less of the cultures.

An example comes from the use of the word "partner". Students are more familiar with its meaning as "someone who can be married to", but not familiar further with its meaning of "someone who can work together with". The participant said, "I asked each student to turn to a 'partner' and begin discussing the task that I had given the class. After about 30 s, I noticed that most of my students had begun to look in my direction and very little dialogue was taking place between students. One student later replied that most of the students did not understand my usage of the word 'partner' in this context and that was the reason for the confusion" (P5).

To remedy this, the participant could in this situation adapt himself to switch to other expressions to accommodate to students. "After receiving feedback from my student, I realized how one seemingly simple word, when used out of the context that it was learned in can cause a massive misunderstanding. Now, I ask students to turn and speak with the person sitting beside them instead of using the word, 'partner'" (P5).

This participant would also suggest to other new teachers that they "need to be aware that cultural differences affect the classroom dynamic greatly. Whether it is through actions, behaviors, or language, a teacher should always make a conscious effort to learn the new culture and adapt his/her teaching to it" (P5). Now the participant would take about 30 s to explain the phrase if he ever used a phrase or expression that may be confusing. This way, his "students are still exposed to natural language and can learn common phrases what will help them sound more natural in their speaking and writing" (P5).

4.3. Academic behavior

A third problem is plagiarism. "The only problem I can think of deals with plagiarism. In the past several students have submitted work that was not their own without giving proper citations" (P2).

What the participant did with this problem was "I gave careful instructions when the assignment was given and talked about plagiarism. Students were given a score of zero for the review and I discussed the matter with them" (P2).

Receiving no scores for their work would cause a conflict between the teacher and students that the students would feel the foreign teacher was too unsympathetic, uncaring. This kind of conflict might result from different learning cultures: Chinese students are used to the way of learning by reciting others, thus to master the knowledge of others. Though in recent years, the conceptions of copyright are gradually getting more stressed among scholars, they are still not so much done with students. Chinese students are not taught much about copyright, and thus they know less how to illustrate reference of the author's names until they do their master's degree papers. Moreover, in dealing with this plagiarism, Chinese teachers would not be so "serious" as foreign teachers do, thus Chinese students do not take plagiarism as a serious problem in their studies.

4.4. Teacher-students relationship

Though we asked the participants to write down those problems they had met in their teaching experiences with Chinese students, some of them still could not help writing some of their happy experiences (three stories); one story mentioned that Chinese students are "respectful, courteous, helpful and for the most part anxious to learn". "Part of this I attribute to the quality of students I teach. They are all post-graduate students. They are not English majors and generally are highly motivated to learn English, seeing this as a tool to assist them in their future educational goals" (P2).

The other story mentioned that Chinese students are friendly and helpful, “they help me run and do errands that I cannot do myself. It is interesting to me to have a willingness from students to help the teacher. In America this interaction would not happen between student and teacher. I am so thankful that the students have come alongside of me to help me” (P3).

These positive experiences reveal something unexpected by the American teachers, which would not happen between student and teacher in America. Even though they are positive experiences, they reflect some pressures suffered by the participants. As said in Chen (2003), when people move from one culture to another, they will face many changes and impacts, such as the changes in living environment, living habits, values, etc. which will impose pressures upon them. “Now here I am relying on my students to do simple task such as get a Sim card for a cell phone or buy medicine for a sick kid of mine. It is a humbling experience to realize you are a needy person in dire need of help” (P3).

These positive experiences help the participants to learn more about Chinese students and help them more in adapting themselves to better their teaching in class. The participant would offer advice to new teachers “to allow students to help them because this also builds a relationship with them and allows for deeper relationship in the classroom” (P3).

5. Conclusions

This study was limited in the number of participants (only six). However, these narrations could at least provide some evidence to illustrate part of the problems and conflicts faced by foreign teachers teaching in Chinese classes.

We could know that the most common problem faced by foreign teachers is the silence of students in class, and this finding conforms to many other research findings concerning the mixed-cultural class styles (Biggs, 1992; Ho, 1993; Liu, 1984). The second common one is the problem of punctuality, complained not only about Chinese students but also about Chinese teachers. Sometimes this problem might be as serious as to be regarded as not respecting the foreign teachers, although we know that this being late is not taken as so serious in Chinese culture. Another common problem in mixed-cultural class is caused by language use, such as pragmatic use of languages, or use of idioms and colloquialisms, which are more culture loaded elements and they are big challenges to both students’ language proficiency and communicative competence. Other problems such as “not complaining to foreign teachers directly” represent the typical Chinese way of communication: protecting the positive face of others. As to the problems of “no respect from Chinese students” and “plagiarism”, we could attribute them to some cultural consequences, but they are actually problems across cultures.

These stories help both foreign teachers and Chinese teachers and students to realize what might be regarded as hinders to their understandings of each other, and hopefully they would be useful for better communication between them. Those positive stories could also serve the purpose of helping foreign teachers to understand better the Chinese students.

Anderson and Lynch (1988) observe: “when we learn a foreign language, we do more than learn a linguistic system. We acquire some degree of familiarity with the foreign cultural systems”. The mixed-cultural classes offer the chances for both host teachers and home students to learn about each other’s cultural system.

The diversity will always exist in the classroom and the success of teaching is based on the ability to use the awareness of differences, and facilitate skills to make these differences benefit the students and the class as a whole. Some Chinese scholars are paying attention to the cultural conflicts in mixed-cultural classes (Duan, 2011; Fan, 2006; Fang, 2009; Yu, 2007), and have provided valuable suggestions as to how to solve these conflicts. Some studies show that identifying a student’s style and then providing instruction consistent with that style contributes to more effective learning (Schmeck, 1988). Feedback from the participants of the help to highly suggest that in order to create

a more a viable educational environment for all students, it is important that teachers understand their own teaching styles, adjust their teaching styles to accommodate the diverse learning styles of their students (Park, 2002). One of the participants said “I also found spending two years learning the language in a Chinese educational style was extremely helpful for me to understand Chinese education as well as find some of the great benefits to some aspects of Chinese style education. I find that the more I understand about the culture and the language of my students, the better the teacher I can be. I found one of the most useful things I did to learn more about my students was to observe other Chinese teachers in the classroom. The teacher should make an effort to adapt some aspects of their teaching or methods to meet the students where they are in their learning experience and expectations” (P4).

However, we have to remember that the degree of adaptation should be appropriate, not completely. “If the students expect the teacher to completely adapt to the local culture, the teacher will have an extra large burden to be teaching out of their comfort zone most of the time and will either struggle with feeling constantly incompetent, misunderstood, or discouraged. Also, if the international teacher adapts completely to local culture, the students miss a valuable lesson of learning from the teacher and about the culture and education culture and styles of the teacher’s background” (P4). And this degree of adaptation is the most difficult part for teachers to control.

“When teachers and students both learn to understand about each other as well as are willing to adapt, the classroom becomes a place where students and teacher are constantly mutually learning, listening, and feel safe to learn”(P4).

It is suggested that teachers should get to know what problems are likely to happen in a mixed class, so that they can get ready for them and thus deal with them successfully.

With the trend of more foreign teachers coming to China to teach English, resulting in a prevalence of mixed-cultural classes, it is hoped that this study would benefit those foreign teachers by revealing some perplexes which some foreign teachers met during their teaching to Chinese students, so as to help those new teachers to overcome those obstacles in their teaching for a better teaching outcome.

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Appendix I

Table 1. Summary of participant information

Participants	Nationality	Age	Gender	University	Years of teaching in China	Subjects
1	USA	39	Male	HIT	5 years	English-writing, speaking, business, listening, etc.
2	USA	33	Male	HIT	2.5 years	Legal English, academic communication, critical thinking audio/visual
3	USA	25	Male	HIT	2 months	Oral and written English
4	USA	30	Female	HIT	6 years	writing, oral
5	USA	30	Female	HIT	2 years	Oral
6	Britain	35	Male	No. 3 high school	5 years	Science

Appendix II

Table 2. Problems and conflicts found in the narrations of the participants

	Categories of problems	Problems and conflicts	Causes to the problems and conflicts	No. of stories
1	Classroom behavior	Silence in class	Different teaching and learning cultures, different roles of students in class	5
		No respect from Chinese students	Different perceptions to respect different expectations of respect (stereotypes of Chinese students)	3
		Not punctual in handing in homework	Differences in concepts of time	2
		No long term plan	Differences in concepts of time	1
		Changing timetable all the time	Differences in concepts of time	1
		Keeping others waiting	Differences in concepts of time	1
		Not talking to teacher directly	Differences in communication behavior	1
2	Pragmatic and linguistic competence	Not understanding teacher's use of phrases	Different pragmalinguistic uses	1
		Not understanding idioms and some terms		2
3	Academic behavior	Plagiarism	Different learning cultures	1
4	Teacher-student relationship	Positive experiences: students friendly, helpful	Different teacher-student relationships	3
Total				21



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