

Presentation by Pingping Chen, Shaanxi Normal University

Welcome to our presentation on **The Academic and Cultural Adaptation of Chinese International Students at UMass Boston: The Struggles and Benefits from the Perspectives of Students and Professors**. First of all, let me give you a brief introduction to our panelists and what we are going to discuss today.

Panelists: Our panel consists of five people. My name is Pingping Chen; I'm a visiting Chinese scholar at UMB. This is Teddy Chocos and Lorena Fuentes. They both are ESL freshman faculty. We have also invited two Chinese international students, Ray and Anstrid to join us.

I will report on my yearlong observations in freshman composition courses and interviews with some Chinese International students about their academic struggles and progress. Teddy is focusing on the passive Chinese students in her class and the use of free writing. Lorena is going to talk about how she engages her Chinese students through humor and peer review. The two students will share their stories from cross-cultural perspectives and discuss the extent to which these cultural factors have influenced their learning process.

Purpose: In terms of the purpose of our presentation, I particularly cite one quote from Vivian Zamel, the ESL program director, in her article "Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL Students Across the Curriculum:"

"It is when we take risks of this sort, when we take this step into the unknown, by looking for evidence of students' intelligence, by rereading their attempts as coherent efforts, by valuing, not just evaluating, their work, and by reflecting on the critical relationship between our work and theirs, that opportunities are created not only for students but for teachers to learn in new ways."(15)

Observations: I like this quote because it fits what I have observed from these reflective ESL instructors and their engaging pedagogy since I started my visiting last fall. I appreciate their philosophy of being responsive to student concerns and having faith in their academic improvement and cultural adaptation.

When I came here for the first time, I was amazed at the diversity of the university. For me, it is a global campus of students of color and faculty of color. However, when I stepped into Lorena's English 100 B/C class, I was shocked because all students are Chinese except one from Korean. The ESL classroom is less diverse than I can anticipate. By the way, my thanks go to Jeff Foulkes, the international partnership advisor, who nicely shared the information from institutional research that 49% of international undergraduate students enrolled this semester are from China. So that's what I mean by "The diverse campus, yet homogenous

ESL classrooms". After working with ESL instructors and Chinese students for the two semesters, I noticed that the most silent individual differences between active students who are digesting fast and making rapid progress and passive students who are always silent in class and look apathetic and unaccomplished. So this phenomenon aroused my curiosity that "what linguistic and cultural factors are contributing to these Chinese ESL learners' difficulty and progress in their transition process at UMB?"

I'm so grateful for the opportunity of observing Lorena's and Teddy's class that I can get easy access to Chinese international students and receive their responses to my question.

Here are what I gathered through observations and interviews about their representative (hopefully, but if not, at least revealing) academic problems and achievements.

Academic struggles in ESL courses:

✓ Plagiarism:

"In China, we are eligible to copy the English composition models while it is accused of plagiarism, which is such a serious issue at UMB.

Although there is no excuse for plagiarism, it is true that Plagiarism is challenging for students from China because A. they are not yet well equipped with academic awareness before entering the university and B. they are brought up in an EFL pedagogy in China that places much emphasis on modeling writing. Therefore this can be a very new experience and difficult issue for them to deal with.

● Critical thinking

"I have stayed in Chinese education system for 12 years. I received complete basic education in China. I think Chinese basic education is in the top of the world, but the significant shortcoming is it is not good for students' critical thinking. That's what I can get in America. Before I attend UMB, I have known how to learn efficiently. But the challenges here are how to learn usefully."

Teaching thinking to nonnative students can be very tough because it is fraught with cultural components. But most ESL instructors make critical thinking accessible for Chinese students by providing them with divergent guidelines to use the language as a means of searching information and formulating opinions. This student indicates that she used to lack such skill because critical thinking has been somewhat discouraged in China and is now in the process of becoming a critical thinker thanks to the higher education she received at UMB.

Academic struggles in mainstream courses:

- Basically, the Chinese students I have interviewed admire their **professors' expertise** and devotion to the course but their first main concern is the language barrier shown in one student's comment. *"Being a nonnative student in the mainstream course doesn't mean my knowledge is weaker, rather I get higher grade than most of them. However, my language barrier prevents me from expressing myself and participating in the class discussion."* He is so concerned about his language deficiency to be the stigma that devalues his subject performance and even intellectual ability.
- Another student feels more frustrated when her professor doesn't slow down or shelter the content for nonnative students. She says *"In other courses, the biggest challenge is sometimes teachers are so fast that I can't follow them all the time. These cases make me feel bad"*. The only way for her is to learn the knowledge at home all by herself so what's the good of learning in class? To her belief, the professor's expectations working well for native students might be overwhelming for Chinese students especially those at the language-improvement stage. She also told me that sometimes the professor can talk without a break and this lecture-based course is to silence all the students.
- I don't mean to offend the professors in the mainstream courses but these are all students' authentic voices. If they can articulate their needs, why couldn't the professors accommodate the demands and be more sensitive to the diversity of student population in class for the optimal teaching and learning?

Struggles are there but I'm delighted to hear from other Chinese students I have met about their continuous improvement and personal achievements.

Academic progress at UMB:

- All of the interviewed students acknowledge that **the university provides them with a place to build knowledge and expand ideas.**
- They all appreciate the ESL instructors they have met who are patient, caring, responsive and helpful.
- They are making shift and becoming aware of all these academic expectations listed here. Ray and Anstrid are good examples who are going to demonstrate these points in their later accounts.

I'm fortunate to gain these insightful views from ESL professors and especially Chinese international students who are young, receptive and strong to meet the challenges. I give them my best wishes that their voices could be heard more and doors would be opened wider with their concerns being attended to and their cross-cultural efforts being appreciated.