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Sixin Fu

*Utah State University*

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EXPLORING TEACHING LANGUAGE WITH CULTURE

by

Sixin Fu

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Logan, Utah

2021

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## ABSTRACT

Exploring Teaching Language with Culture

by

Sixin Fu: Master of Second Language Teaching

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Dr. Sarah Gordon

Department: Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies

This portfolio contains the author's insights into teaching a second language, which she gained while in the Master of Second Language Teaching (MSLT) program at Utah State University (USU). It is organized in two major sections: teaching perspectives and research perspectives. The content reflects the author's main focus and value on language teaching as a graduate instructor and student.

In the teaching perspectives section, the author shares the professional environment that she wants to work in, her teaching philosophy statement, and the professional development in language education through observing her colleagues' teaching. In the research perspectives, two research papers and an annotated bibliography are included, which are tightly related to the author's philosophy in teaching a second language.

(70 pages)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank my family for being patient and financially and mentally supportive of my life path in pursuing higher education. Even though my parents live far away, they still have a positive and great influence on my life.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACTFL = American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

CALL = Computer-Assisted Language Teaching

CLT = Communicative Language Teaching

EFL = English as a Foreign Language

ELL = English Language Learner

ESL = English as a Second Language

FL = Foreign Language

L1 = First Language / Native Language

L2 = Second Language

MSLT = Master of Second Language Teaching

SCT = Sociocultural Theory

SLA = Second Language Acquisition

TESOL = Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

TL = Target Language

TPS = Teaching Philosophy Statement

USU = Utah State University

## INTRODUCTION

This portfolio reflects my personal and academic growth during my time in the Master of Second Language teaching program at Utah State University. The learning and teaching experiences that I have gained in the program contributed to the development of this portfolio, in particular to my teaching perspectives and research perspectives.

In the first half of the portfolio, I offer my teaching perspectives, which consist of: professional environment, teaching philosophy statement, and professional development through teaching observation. These three components indicate my beliefs and values in language teaching and learning, and showcase the development of my teacher identity.

The second half of the portfolio contains research perspectives in which I explore the relation of cultural, academic, social, and cognitive aspects in language teaching and learning. I discuss Chinese students' academic achievement in an English learning environment. As one example, I focus on the pragmatic differences, specifically in compliment responses, between Chinese and English culture. Finally, I look at the importance of creativity in language learning.

Overall, this portfolio contains both my teaching perspectives and research perspectives. My teaching perspectives, along with my identity as a teacher and language learner, have been developed through my education, experience, and research. This identity has shaped my portfolio, which outlines how best practices will influence my future as a teacher.



## TEACHING PERSPECTIVES

## PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

As a native Chinese speaker, I intend to teach Chinese in a dual-language immersion (DLI) program. Students in a DLI program learn their academic content such as math, science, and social studies in two languages. In general, such programs develop learners' literacy skills in two languages and foster cultural sensitivity.

I have had other experiences during my journey as a teacher that were different from the DLI environment. I was a kindergarten teacher for a while, which brought me a lot of joy and made my life meaningful. I enjoy working with kids, so teaching Chinese in elementary school would be my preference for the future. In addition, I have also had the opportunity to teach adults Chinese in college, which took place online. Both age groups gave me valuable perspectives on teaching. My online teaching experience enabled me to become familiar with remote language instruction, an approach that has become crucial in 2020-2021.

Compared to online teaching, I personally prefer a face-to-face environment because it provides learners more opportunity for interaction, which benefits their second language acquisition. However, during the pandemic, hybrid classes, which combine face-to-face and online learning, have been more suitable. I have adapted as a teacher and found that the hybrid model also provides students opportunities to interact with others while maintaining a physical distance.

Looking forward, I plan to teach at a public school in the United States. This will allow me to stay close to my family, ensure a stable career, and provide me with opportunities to continue developing my teaching ability.

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY STATEMENT

### **Introduction**

Prior to starting the MSLT program, my definition of teaching was simply a transmission of knowledge. After my first semester of coursework, I began to realize that teaching was more than just imparting knowledge to others. It also includes sharing experiences, emotions, and cultural norms. One of my goals for teaching a second language (i.e., Chinese Mandarin) is to help people learn about the language itself as well as the rich cultural backgrounds behind it.

In order to be an effective and successful teacher, I've come to understand five important areas to focus on: 1) importance of learning the cultures behind the language; 2) emphasis on critical thinking, speaking skills, and creativity, rather than just test-taking ability; 3) interactive environment where students feel comfortable communicating and making mistakes; 4) corrective feedback that is not just pointing out errors; and 5) the importance of individual differences. Collectively, these five areas make up my teaching philosophy.

### **History & Culture**

In my experience as a student in China, I did not learn anything about the history or cultures behind English. For example, I did not know that Americans have so many interesting holiday traditions until after I came to the United States, such as those surrounding Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Halloween. I believe that if the teachers in China had also taught our class these fun cultural differences behind English and integrated them into the curriculum, we would have better understood cultural references, and ultimately might have become more interested in learning English. Cai and Lv (2019) researched college English classes in three Chinese cities—Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou—and reported that although 90% of the teachers

were aware of the importance of developing intercultural competence in higher English education, they rarely provided students the opportunity to improve or develop their cultural competence in class. This study echoes my own personal, anecdotal experiences as well.

Understanding and being sensitive to the differences between cultures and contact is an essential element in achieving successful intercultural communication (Arabski & Wojtaszek, 2013). For example, North Americans tend to be direct in using refusal strategies while people from East Asian countries (e.g., China, Japan) tend to be more indirect in refusal. The different strategies that cultures use in refusals might lead to a misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, learning the culture and the pragmatics behind the language facilitates the process of second language acquisition. Moreover, it helps to build effective communication and exchanges between speakers or writers of different linguistic backgrounds. The emphasis on culture in my teaching and the relationship between what the culture values and how people interact socially addresses the ACTFL Standards related to culture, which is one of the five “C” goal areas (*World-readiness standards for learning languages - actfl*).

### **Speaking, Critical Thinking & Creativity**

While many SLA experts agree that culture and communication should be at the heart of second-language teaching, the education system in China is exam-oriented. This means that the teachers measure what students learn based on written exams. Because of this, teachers tend to concentrate on learning outcomes, and might tend to focus their teaching on the test requirements. Instead of encouraging abstract reasoning and critical thinking, EFL students in China focus on memorizing language structures, such as grammar and spelling, so that they pass the tests. According to “The Impact of Exam Culture on Chinese Students”, passing these tests is

not only important for students, but also for the reputation of teachers and schools (2020). Exams and exam scores are thus part of the culture in the language classroom.

Vocabulary and language structure are indeed vital to a student's ability to understand and use the language because they form the foundation for reading and writing. However, the Chinese approach to second language teaching, based on my learning experiences in China, misses some key components: students' speaking, critical thinking skills, and creativity. All three components are valued and encouraged in my experience in teaching language education at Utah State University and most other institutions of higher education across the United States.

Vocabulary and structure are only part of the language. Memorizing vocabulary in a second language is comparable to the knowledge category of Bloom's Taxonomy, whereas creative thinking enhances that skill to the top categories of synthesis and evaluation (Bloom, 1956).

Being able to speak a language plays an important role in actually learning and being able to use and express oneself in a language in meaningful ways. For instance, on a personal note, even though I had been learning English in an academic setting for 10 years, once I arrived in the United States, I realized how limited my English ability really was. My lack of speaking skills made it difficult to communicate effectively with my professors, classmates, and new friends. I struggled, as many other foreign students have, because the linguistic output (especially speaking) plays a vital role in facilitating second language acquisition and comprehension (Fuente, 2002).

According to Swain's output hypothesis (1985), output is as important as input in language learning, students will not know how much they know about the language until they use it. Therefore, to ensure students' linguistic output, Utah DLI (Dual Language Immersion)

program encourages students use only the target language in the classroom. Another approach to produce language output is through translanguaging – receiving information in one language and producing in another. This way, students can use their native language (L1) to develop the linguistic output in the target language (L2) (Sung, & Tsai, 2019).

In addition to speaking skills, developing students' critical thinking skills is an indispensable component in second language teaching, just as it is in teaching within many other disciplines or fields. For example, critical thinking is closely associated with students' success in writing. In one major study, students who had higher critical thinking skills scored higher on report writing, while students who had lower critical thinking skills scored lower on report writing (Yusri, 2018). According to Yusri, accomplished writers utilize critical thinking skills to self-assess and reflect on their writing. Critical thinking can be developed and improved by asking questions that elicit reflection in a classroom discussion or a writing assignment. It can also be developed through tasks such as audio-recorded journals. Audio journals, in contrast to traditional written journals, require students to record their thoughts orally. Dantas-Whitney (2002) shows that students used critical thinking skills to investigate course content and to analyze topics while doing audiotaped journals. Therefore, providing different opportunities for critical thinking in a second language improves a student's development in the new language.

In addition, creativity is important in a language learning environment. Implementing creative tasks into the teaching curriculum develops students' creativity and linguistic skills. For instance, it is essential to recognize that creative writing assignments can enhance students' motivation to engage in the tasks, confidence, and writing skills (Arshavskaya, 2015). Completing assignments that require creativity has a positive relation with students' motivation and achievement in language acquisition and their effective communication skills.

## **Interactive Environment**

Understanding the value of creativity in learning, I plan to integrate creative assignments in my future classroom to help students learn linguistic structure and improve their fluency in speaking a second language. Engagement and accessibility are important criteria to remember when I design activities that boost creativity, because “Optimal learning is most likely when students are engaged, when learning resources including peers, texts, classroom anchor charts, and such, are accessible” (Johnston, Dozier, & Smit, 2016, page 1). I believe an interactive classroom environment will achieve this engagement and opportunity to learn these various resources. Interactivity that keeps in mind engagement and accessibility of resources provides students more opportunities to comfortably share their ideas and opinions, which makes them feel more involved in the classroom. Students will also be more likely to develop friendships with others in an interactive classroom. This will help them enjoy the class and want to attend.

Games, role plays, group tasks, discussion, competition, and other activities can make the class more interactive. When I was in high school, my English teacher designed a game to make the class more interesting and help students memorize vocabulary. She divided the class into two groups; whichever group wrote down the most words on the whiteboard would win. The winning team would get a notebook as a prize. Everyone participated in the competition, students were more active during that class than any other class I attended. That class increased my motivation to learn because I interacted with my classmates and my teacher.

Second language learning not only occurs in a formal education setting but also occurs in remote instruction, such as when a student is using a smartphone to extend the learning opportunities outside the classroom (Wrigglesworth, 2020). In the 2020 school year, most schools in the United State shifted to remote teaching methods due to the COVID-19. In this

case, using electronic devices helped students engage in tasks together. The interaction between teachers and students was maintained and teachers were still able to provide feedback on students' work.

### **Corrective Feedback on Speaking Tasks**

Providing feedback as a teacher is a vital ingredient in a student's learning experience. Using positive reinforcement can be a good strategy to increase students' motivation to learn. When teachers give students positive feedback after they ask or answer questions, it shows the teacher values their participation which increases the probability they will ask and answer more questions in the future. It's important for teachers to provide the type of feedback that will encourage more participation and thereby foster more interactivity in the classroom or virtual classroom. But not all types of feedback are the same and not all are equally as effective. Kamins and Dweck (1999) found that if teachers gave students feedback related to their fixed personal traits like intelligence, students were more likely to lose confidence and motivation to solve problems. Saying "You are good at this" is complimenting the ability they have. Using "That is a good answer" compliments their thinking and participation which will encourage more of both. Negativity or criticism of any student in the class may inhibit participation from everyone in the class. Saying something such as "That is a good way of thinking about it" and then going on to explain the correct answer is a better way to encourage everyone to participate. This will create a more interactive and more inclusive environment in which all students may feel comfortable.

My approach for corrective feedback is an adaptation of "partial correction", as proposed by Johnston, Dozier, and Smit (2016). Partial correction refers to a teacher helping a student by pointing out the correct parts of their incorrect answers first, then suggesting strategies to help them figure out the right answer. After applauding the student for participation, I utilize partial



correction to provide specific positive comments. As I have seen in my classes, partial correction not only retains students' confidence but also helps them learn from failure and develop critical thinking skills.

### **Individual differences and participation**

Creating a successful classroom is more than giving partial correction and positive feedback, of course. After observing several language classes, I realized that students' personalities and involvement clearly influence the classroom's atmosphere. Some students are extroverted and chatty. They are more than willing to give comments and ask questions. Other students prefer to listen and observe—the introverts. Successful teachers need to be adaptive to the balance of chatty and quiet students and be able to involve all the students. Asmali (2014) and her colleagues studied “the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and language learning strategies”. The Big Five personality traits are: extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (Cherry, 2020). The result of this recent study indicates that extroverted students tend to use social strategies, while introverted students tend to use metacognitive strategies in second language learning. As a teacher, I need to be aware of these strategies and be able to recognize them and adapt to them in my classroom, to make sure everyone is included.

Even though students have various personalities and learning strategies, providing each with an equal chance to interact with classmates is significant in second language learning. It is inescapable that some of the students will be more active than others and more comfortable speaking and sharing ideas in class. Teachers might unconsciously have more interaction with students who talk more in class, a concept B. F. Skinner explains through “operant conditioning” in which a student's behavior is shaped through positive reinforcement. As classroom students

consistently receive positive reinforcement, the introverted and extroverted students will learn that their participation is welcome on whatever level they want to participate.

### **Conclusion**

My teaching philosophy is evolving over time, but its foundation is built on five components. Cultural competence is important in learning a second language. My students will develop cultural competence in Mandarin Chinese by completing culture-related tasks. During the class activities, my students will be encouraged to utilize critical thinking skills to accomplish creative assignments such as journaling in the second language. My classroom will be an interactive learning environment. I will use positive corrective feedback to increase students' participation and confidence. Furthermore, I will be adaptive to my class by utilizing multiple teaching strategies to involve diverse students.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TEACHING OBSERVATIONS

### **Introduction**

Observation is the first step of learning, as it guides our perspective on the world. Observing classes allows us to pay attention to teaching strategies, notice details that are not considered before, and experience the actual situations in classrooms. It helps us avoid making mistakes in our own teaching and be familiar with the practical teaching. During the MSLT program, I have observed multiple language classes, including: Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and Portuguese, from beginner to advanced levels. These observations have facilitated the development of my identity as a teacher. In this paper, I will describe several teaching observations and their influence on the development of three themes in my teaching philosophy.

### **Culture matters**

Learning about culture can be motivational and meaningful. I believe culture is a necessary element in language teaching and learning because it not only increases student's interest in learning the language, but also helps them have a better comprehension of the language. I once observed a Chinese class where many students struggled with recognizing and writing Chinese characters. To help students learn, the teacher explained the cultural origin of each character and how it signals the meaning. Explaining the origins and components of characters helps them make connection between the characters and its meanings.

In addition to the Chinese class, other language classes that I observed implemented cultural elements into the teaching curriculums as well. For example, I saw students learning a song, writing a poem in the target language, and doing a presentation on a holiday. These culture related projects enhance student's engagement in the classroom activities. It also shows their

enjoyment and enthusiasm in learning the language and its culture. This is what I would like to see in my classroom. Therefore, the importance of teaching the culture behind the language became an essential part of my teaching philosophy.

### **Corrective feedback & language output**

Another vital teaching strategy that I have learned from classroom observation is paying attention to corrective feedback. There are several types of correction feedback: recast, clarification request, explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). Every teacher has their different perspectives on giving corrective feedback. In the Chinese class, the instructor used immediate recast by providing students the correct form and answer right after students' wrong answers. On the contrary, the Japanese teacher waited a couple of seconds to give students a chance to rethink their answers, then provided them with the correct answers. Although two instructors used different corrective feedbacks, they both avoided pointing out student's mistakes, which helped maintain their confidence in learning the language and willingness to participate in the class.

When students get involved in learning activities, they increase their language output. Evidence for the output hypothesis of language acquisition which was developed by Swain (1985) was observed in both classes. The output could be in the format of speaking and writing. During my observations, all instructors focused on practicing and recycling the language structures that students had learned in that class period or previously. For instance, in the Japanese class, students practiced using dialogues by discussing with their peers and the teacher.

### **Interactive Environment**

An interactive environment is co-constructed by teacher and student. Sometimes, it can also be affected by the classroom and the physical space in which learning is to take place. The size, furniture, and layout of the classroom plays an important role in students' level of activity. Numbers of students can also impact the learning environment and levels of motivation or interaction. Anecdotally, I once observed a Portuguese class that was a small class with about five students. One student did not pay attention during the lecture and seemed bored. Even though the other students were trying to focus on the lecture, the class atmosphere was negatively affected by that student's lack of engagement. The small classroom size made that one student's behavior more disruptive than it would have been in a large classroom. In addition, an active classroom atmosphere is positively related to student's high motivation in participating in class.

Students who have a high motivation in learning a second language are more likely to be successful in second language acquisition (Anjomshoa & Sadighi, 2015). There are two well-known types of motivations: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation means being motivated to do something for external rewards; intrinsic motivation is being interested in doing something, which is for personal joy. When students have high intrinsic motivation, they tend to enjoy the process of second language learning. Students' motivation in attending classes physically and psychologically can be developed by having a good relationship with others in the classroom and participating in learning activities such as group discussions and games.

In the Spanish class that I observed, students have good interaction and contact with other students. I saw that the interactivity was related to the teacher trying to build community and personalize the class. In general, the students in this course appear to have fun doing group activities, and they feel comfortable and safe around their classmates, which is important in a

second language learning environment. I have come to realize the purpose of doing self-introductions in the first class, which helped students know each other better, and make friends with others who share the same interest. In addition, I try to relate the topics in the curriculum to students' lives.

Students are more willing to speak and get involved in the class discussion if they feel safe to make mistakes. It is vital for students to know that everyone makes mistakes, it is the process of learning. Teachers play an important role in making students feel free to make mistakes. For example, the Japanese instructor kept a smile on her face throughout the whole class, which made students think that she was a nice teacher, and she would be kind to them even when they make mistakes. Though it may seem simple, small non-verbal cues such as a smile or positive gesture are helpful in promoting interactivity. With these observations, I believe that giving students a good impression, showing them that I am kind and willing to help them, is also an important element of a good relationship.

### **Observation Takeaway**

These observations have confirmed key aspects of my teaching philosophy. Students are more important than the teacher in a classroom, and a good relationship between students and teachers is important for learning and teaching. I have learned from the observations that there are a lot of ways to teach, and it is hard to say which way is right or wrong. As teachers, we may all learn from each other and from our students. Even with the same teacher, teaching materials, and teaching method, different students with different backgrounds or types of motivations can bring out various outcomes. Therefore, it is necessary for a teacher to be flexible and adapt to new environments. I believe that the teaching method that meets the student's needs is the right method.

## RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

LANGUAGE, LITERACY or CULTURE PAPER #1

Chinese Students' Academic Achievement in a U.S. University



## PURPOSE AND REFLECTION

In my first semester in the MSLT program (Fall 2019), I took a course from Dr. Karin deJonge-Kannan, called “Issues & Topics: Teaching English in a Global Context”. It explores various topics including English become the dominant position in the global market of language, the influence of English on other languages, the key frameworks to teach English to EFL/ESL learners, and the relation between social justice and language teaching. As English has become a worldwide trend, many countries require students learning English as a global communicative skill. Despite years of English learning, EFL/ESL learners experience discrimination to some extent. This course discussed the privilege of native English speakers and bias against non-native English speakers.

As a non-native English speaker, I experienced bias and challenges while studying and living in an English-speaking environment, which interested me in gaining more knowledge about Chinese ESL students' learning experience in the U.S., who might share similar bias and challenges. Therefore, I collaborated with a peer (Naomi Fujii), who were interested in the same topic, in writing this paper - focusing on Chinese students' academic achievement in a U.S. university. The content, linguistic structure, and the titles of subsections have been modified since the version that was submitted in an MSLT course. Now it explores the impact of cultural differences between China and the U.S. on Chinese students, their challenges and advantages of studying in America, and the potential concerns that needed to be addressed.

Investigating this topic made me realize the importance of culture aspects in learning and teaching a second language, which became an essential component in my teaching philosophy. This paper has contributed to the development of my teaching identity, which believes that culture and language cannot be separated from each other, and cultural competence can facilitate

L2 learners' success in second language acquisition. It also inspires me to explore further on how to implement culture in the teaching curriculum. It is important to include this paper into the portfolio for the reason that it addresses L2 learners' challenges and advantages that are closely related to cultural aspects. It supports the significant characteristics of cross-cultural awareness in a language classroom.

## **Introduction**

The number of Chinese international students who study in a university or college in the United States has been increasing. Especially at the undergraduate level, students from China are one of the majority groups of international students in the U.S. According to the data from the Institute of International Education, the number of Chinese international students in U.S. colleges and universities totaled more than 274,439 students, and this number is 31% of all international students in the United States in 2014 (Ma, 2015). Though many Chinese students come to the U.S. to study each year, the transition is not always easy, many of them face challenges in their transition in U.S. universities, and academic probation is one ordeal that Chinese international undergraduate students are concerned about (Mei, 2019). Many Chinese students, especially undergraduate students, find it difficult to get used to the new environment, both culturally and academically different from what they are used to. Their challenges may affect their academic achievement. As there are so many cultural differences between China and the United States, Chinese students who come to the U.S. for further education tend to struggle with how to adapt to the new environment.

In this paper, I examine some of the problems and difficulties that many international students from China face in higher education institutions in the U.S. Prescriptively, I then analyze what Chinese students could potentially do to solve these problems and what North American faculty can do to support Chinese students in their academic endeavors.

## **Cultural Differences**

To generalize, Chinese culture is often characterized by collectivism, which means many Chinese people see themselves as part of a particular group. For example, a friend of mine was once asked, “What do you think about more and more foreigners coming to travel in China?”

She replied, “We welcome everyone to visit China, and share our culture with them.” She unconsciously said “We” instead of “I”, even though the person asking the question was asking for her personal opinion. On the contrary, North American culture is characterized as highly individualistic, which means many people in the U.S. emphasize individual achievement. In an individualist society, when a person earns a diploma, it provides him/her with a sense of achievement and improves his/her self-respect (Xu, 2002). However, in a collectivist society, a diploma gives honor not only to the holder but also to the group to which he/she belongs (Xu, 2002).

This individualism vs collectivism difference is often apparent in classroom group discussions. North American instructors often have their students share their ideas or thoughts with the whole class after group discussions. From collectivist perspectives, anyone in the group can represent the whole group, so it is unnecessary for everyone in the group to talk. But in most North American universities, not speaking in class sufficiently is considered a lack of active participation, which might negatively affect professors’ impression of Chinese students. The relationship between teacher and students impacts Chinese students’ adaptation to the new learning environment (Oramas, Gringarten & Mitchell, 2018) in the U.S., where participation is seen in a different light and participation grades are often given.

Another important cultural difference between China and the United States is the difference in power distance. Chinese culture is regarded as having a large power distance, which also dominates in school settings (Xu, 2002). Chinese students are taught to be respectful to their teachers from the time they are in elementary school. The education process in China is teacher-centered; teachers are authority figures who cannot be challenged or criticized (Yao, 2008).

Students are not allowed to ask questions or talk unless they are invited by a teacher who initiates all the communication in the classroom; otherwise, students need to stay silent.

In North America, the education process is student-centered. This means that students can take the initiative. Most Chinese students have difficulty shifting from a teacher-centered to a student-centered process when they first come to the U.S. Students can ask professors questions in class, and even interrupt by raising their hand and speaking, and professors are happy to help students ask them questions. Instructors often ask, “any questions?” Students and teachers are equal in this area; students can discuss and even argue with teachers on class-related subjects. Having discussions and arguments with professors and other students is seen as a helpful method of effective learning (Xu, 2002). Chinese culture, on the other hand, advocates the avoidance of confrontation and conflict. That is one of the reasons why Chinese students are not active in class discussions. Coming from an educational background that does not promote discussion or debate with the professor, they may see discussions and arguments as a form of conflict (Xu, 2002). If Chinese students are not able to learn independently, or to argue or raise questions with professors and classmates, they cannot overcome the difficulties to adapt to the active learning paradigm that is so common in the U.S. (Li, 2007; Shi, 2011).

The third main difference is in teaching approaches. For English as a foreign language (EFL) classes, more specifically the typical Chinese approach emphasizes language knowledge, content, and exam results (Yao, 2008). Chinese teachers mainly talk about vocabulary, grammar structure, and writing and reading skills that might be tested on the exams, whereas North American approaches focus on the realistic use of language, the learning process, oral fluency, and sociolinguistic competence (Yao, 2008). Different teaching approaches influence Chinese students' academic achievement. For instance, Yuan's (2011) study indicated that Chinese

students' lack of knowledge of American history and culture may indirectly impact their grades. This is because they may be unable to recognize cultural references or assessments that feature such knowledge might be less inclusive of international students from diverse backgrounds. All these cultural differences—collectivism vs individualism, large vs small power distances, and different teaching approaches—may become either obstacles or facilitators for Chinese students' academic performance in universities in the U.S. The difficulties and advantages of the cultural differences will be discussed below.

### **Difficulties**

Certain attributes with which students enter a classroom, such as for example their status as English language learners or as persons who grew up outside the U.S., are beyond their control. Blaming students for these attributes is referred to by the academic community as a “deficit perspective”. Such a biased perspective leads teachers to view non-native students as deficient in academic skills due to their language development. A deficit perspective on the part of teachers is unhelpful for students, and does not address their learning needs (Heng, 2018).

Several variables that effect Chinese students in the United States are related to their language proficiency. A qualitative study in the southern United States found that international students, including Chinese students, reflected that they have difficulties in academic (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and sociocultural settings (Oramas, Gringarten & Mitchell, 2018). Chinese students experienced these difficulties in many areas due to the mismatch between educational practice and their learning needs, such as: communicating with people, listening to lectures, comprehending textbooks, and writing essays.

Even though English is a required subject starting in elementary school in China, the teaching methods and materials are exam-oriented, and they usually don't require the use of English outside the classrooms, which leads to a lack of practical application. These obstacles have caused Chinese students' difficulties in building a positive social relationship with others and achieving academic success (Rientjes, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers, 2012). It is hard to make friends without efficient communicative skills and to perform adequately in school without the linguistic ability to understand the lectures.

Additionally, Chinese students can be seen as a threat by U.S. students to their education and in other areas, which decreases their willingness to communicate and interact with other students (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010). This lack of communication may contribute to Chinese students' ability to receive adequate learning opportunities at school. It may also impact a Chinese student's capability to make friends. For example, a football game is a huge sporting event in the U.S., however, American football does not exist in Chinese culture. Therefore, when people are talking about football, it can be an obstacle to building a good relationship with them.

Many universities in the United States require Chinese students to provide TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores. TOEFL evaluates whether the applicants have a sufficient level of English proficiency to communicate with L1 speakers. However, passing the TOEFL does not automatically indicate an ability to communicate. Yan's study (2019) indicated that even though candidates passed the test and were accepted into Purdue University and the University of Melbourne, they could barely communicate in English. The reason why they were unable to clearly communicate is closely related to the Chinese education process mentioned

above, which focuses on learning exam content instead of developing the actual skills needed to communicate in a real-life situation.

Exam-oriented practice plays an important role in teaching in China, as I explained above. English teachers have a high expectation of students using and writing correct grammar structure and vocabulary, which contributes to students' consciousness of using accurate grammar and vocabulary. In an interview study of native Chinese university students who speak English as a foreign language, Yao (2008) reports that one of the participants, Nathan, stated that he paid close attention to his grammar and pronunciation when he spoke. He was so focused on not making any mistakes, he prevented himself from speaking and expressing himself fluently (Yao, 2008).

Besides, Chinese students' consciousness of error avoidance is caused by the "yes-or-no" teaching method. Most teachers tend to ask "yes- or- no" questions, and students are expected to give the correct answers. They receive positive feedback only when they provide the correct answers. This also explains why Chinese students are not used to answering "why" questions in a U.S. classroom. Additionally, Hsu and Huang (2017) found that when students did not receive positive teacher confirmation, their willingness to participate in class did not increase. Many Chinese students in similar situations are affected by error avoidance because it inhibits them from making friends with L1 speakers and negatively affects their learning. Many international students experience a sense of loneliness; however, they have also said that they don't have time to make friends because of the academic workload (Xu, 2002). This leads to Chinese students having low self-confidence; in turn, causing them to be reticent and anxious during English oral lessons (Liu, 2005). Not being able to be a part of the learning community or having their



confidence lowered can negatively influence their performance in oral English; the more reticent they are, the more anxious they will be during English oral classes. However, their level of reticence and anxiety varied across different activities (Liu, 2005).

Chinese students experience a higher expectation of critical thinking from teachers in the U.S. In China, the teachers often show students all the correct answers on the test by writing them on the blackboard. However, if the teacher is asked to clarify an answer for a further explanation, the student is often told to simply memorize the correct answer instead of explaining it. This form of teaching may deprive students of an opportunity to practice critical thinking. Critical thinking is generally viewed as a universal thinking skill in the U.S., and Chinese students define critical thinking as something that they will use when they study abroad in the future. Chinese students treat critical thinking skills as less important than U.S. faculty because they don't think critical thinking can be applied in their life or work (Chen, 2018).

In Chen's study (2018), Chinese students described challenges that they faced while studying abroad when they were held to a high expectation for critical thinking, and most of them tended to focus on whether they felt safe talking about their experience or thoughts, whether the class community valued their sharing, and whether they understood the interaction pattern in a U.S. university. The different expectations for critical thinking impact Chinese students' adaptation to new academic environments. This means if Chinese students develop their critical thinking skills by sharing their experiences or thoughts, their English proficiency can be improved to a certain extent (Lun, Fischer & Ward, 2010). Critical thinking skills that they develop in a new learning environment may be one positive aspect of the adversity that challenges them. Although there are many challenges that Chinese students face when they study in a U.S. university, there are also advantages that help them achieve academic success.

### **Advantages**

In Xu's study (2002), the conclusion was drawn that most Chinese students are very successful in the United States. The reasons for this success fall into three categories: 1) study habits (including competitive orientation), 2) parental support, and 3) linguistic environment. The main contributor towards their success is their study habits formed through the value their culture places on hard work. Chinese students also have another tradition—the emphasis on academic competition (Zhao & Heyman, 2018). Academic competition and competitiveness are valued. An interesting finding is the greater competitive motives Chinese students have, the more likely they are to hide their academic effort (Zhao & Heyman, 2018). This phenomenon can be explained by looking at the Chinese education system, which is an entrance system. Only a certain number of candidates are accepted into college in China, thus they have an intrinsic motivation to become the top students in the classroom and attend their desired colleges. To

achieve this, they may even hide their effort from the other students in hope their competitors will not try as hard.

The second contributor towards student's success is parental support. Parental support is the main contributor towards better English skills. This prepares them to adapt to the new learning environment in the U.S. faster. Chinese students who have financial support from their parents can better concentrate on their studies without concerns about financial issues. Parental financial support is also beneficial when Chinese parents are willing to pay for their children's extracurricular learning or private tutoring or continued lessons. Extracurricular activities give students an advantage in a certain field, such as English, math, music. Lastly, students tend to be more successful at speaking and pronunciation when their parents care more about their speaking and listening skills (Yao, 2008).

As I discussed in my own teaching philosophy above, most language teachers agree that teaching culture is vital. "A foreign language cannot be acquired in isolation from its cultural context" (Wang, 2017, p. 56), therefore, being immersed in an English-speaking linguistic environment can be an advantage for Chinese students to improve their English proficiency. They have more opportunities to practice their oral English and are even forced to use English when it is the only way to communicate with others. The realistic practice of immersion, or study abroad, has become one of the most important factors in shaping Chinese students' acquisition of English pronunciation and speaking proficiency.

### **Addressing Concerns**

Although Chinese students have certain advantages to achieve academic success in the U.S., there are some concerns regarding to their adaptation to a new learning environment.

According to Mei (2019), the main reasons for receiving academic probation after the first semester are due to mental and emotional aspects -- in other words, environmental adaptability -- not due to lack of academic proficiency. Many Chinese international students believe that enrollment in a university in the U.S. is one of the best ways to bring them a higher status in their future. Therefore, they make getting an admission letter from a U.S. university their goal and make effort and prepare for the study abroad tests rather than preparing for academic learning at U.S. universities. However, even when students received high TOEFL scores, the score alone does not guarantee academic success. English proficiency isn't the only factor in a high GPA. In other words, if an international student has a low GPA, it does not necessarily mean that the student has low English proficiency (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012). This could be related to the issues behind low participation grades mentioned above, or many other factors.

The percentage of first-year Chinese international students who get academic probation has been increasing despite high TOEFL scores. According to Ma (2016), eight important factors are hindering the academic achievement of Chinese international undergraduate students in the United States: language barriers, cultural differences in classroom organization, lack of experience in making a presentation, too much parental engrossment in the major selection, difficulties in adapting to a new environment, psychological concerns, lack of preparation for pursuing higher education, and removal from American colleges or universities. One of the best ways to solve these issues is by using study abroad professionals. Study abroad professionals provide sufficient information in advance and prevent problems before they happen so students can focus on pursuing academic success (Zhang, 2011). Professional advising thus could assist in academic success for Chinese students going abroad.

Considering that academic probation often occurs in the first semester in the U.S. for students experiencing difficulties, the role of a support network as a safety net is needed for new students. Informal mentorship decreases international students' sense of anxiety and loneliness (Wan, 2017) and is one possible, viable solution to these issues. Moreover, Ma (2016) recommends eight important strategies to overcome the difficulties that Chinese students face: 1) to develop orientation materials and provide information in Chinese, 2) provide an ESL program, 3) produce more opportunities to help improve their English proficiency, 4) provide courses or lectures to get to know multiculturalism, 5) provide experienced Chinese students as resources to help new Chinese undergraduate students, 6) arrange for more and better services to Chinese students, 7) create a welcoming environment, and 8) to recruit parents of Chinese international undergraduate students. I agree that incorporating these strategies will help Chinese students have a stronger foundation for success.

Some Chinese students receive opportunities in high school to improve their English fluency before they begin their studies and face these problems in a U.S. university (Bradley, 2018). With the spread of English education in China, the number of Chinese students enrolled in American universities is increasing. However, there is a lack of support after their studies begin in the United States. To prepare better for studying abroad, learning about the cultural differences, classroom settings, academic, societal and linguistic adaptation helps teach Chinese students how to solve problems in advance so they can focus on pursuing academic success (Bradley, 2018). Preparation before moving to a new environment is essential to success.

## **Conclusion**

The number of Chinese undergraduate students enrolling in U.S. universities has increased. Chinese students are taking advantage of international opportunities in diverse

colleges. Some problems and concerns are becoming apparent as the population of Chinese students increase. Students and faculty need to recognize the fact that academic success does not depend only on a high level of English proficiency, but also on a high level of social competence. Understanding the differences between the U.S. and Chinese education systems, the methods they each use, and preparing Chinese international students for the adjustment will help them succeed.

LANGUAGE, LITERACY or CULTURE PAPER # 2

A Comparison of Chinese and English Culture in Compliment Responses

## PURPOSE AND REFLECTION

In 2020 Fall, I took the course called “Second Language Pragmatics”, which was taught by Dr. Karin deJonge-Kannan. This class not only discussed the basic knowledge and understanding of pragmatics in second language acquisition but also the awareness of diverse perspectives from different cultures and the implementation of pragmatics in L2 classroom. It explored a variety of speech acts and how to carry out manner that are considered culturally appropriate, which includes the topics of apologizing, refusing an offer, complimenting/respond to a compliment, and so on.

Although every topic provides a diverse perspective and enhances the awareness of cross-cultural differences, the topic of complimenting/respond to a compliment interest me the most. Being interested in the various functions of complimenting in social intervention from different cultures, my peer (Brandee Burk) and I decided to explore this topic to a further extent. The purpose of this paper is to determine and discuss the similarities and differences of how to respond to a compliment between Chinese and Western cultures, and the pragmatic transfer or possible failure between students’ native language and target language. The content and structure of the paper has been modified and reorganized since the version that was submitted in a MSLT course.

Exploring pragmatics between two cultures facilitates the development of my teaching philosophy. It helps me realize that culture contains a lot of aspects, and pragmatics is an important part of it, especially when it associates with second language teaching and learning. Gaining pragmatic competence in the target language/culture enhances L2 learner's comprehension ability, communicative skills, and language proficiency. This paper is important



in the portfolio because it supports my statement that culture plays a vital role in second language acquisition and education and provides a perspective in the field of pragmatics.

## **A Comparison of Chinese and English Culture in Compliment Responses**

### **Introduction**

The predominant focus of learning a language is often on linguistic aspects, such as grammar and vocabulary, for many teachers or learners around the world. This focus was especially popular in the past, where the grammar-translation method and other methods that focus on implicit grammar instruction the status quo. Yet, if linguistic aspects are the sole focus in L2 classrooms, language learners will make sociocultural mistakes because they don't know how to appropriately interact in real world contexts, such as those involving speech acts. These sociocultural mistakes occur because the L2 learner has not behaved in accordance with generally accepted cultural norms in the target culture (Yu, 2003). If learners are grammatically knowledgeable in the language, but pragmatically unaware, they risk being "fluent fools" (Bennett, 1997, p.1). What is considered pragmatically appropriate is dependent on the target language culture and norms. Consequently, it is vital that students are taught pragmatics and speech acts in their L2 classrooms so that they can be communicatively competent. This paper explores one specific example of how pragmatics can be so important to learn in the L2 classroom.

Students' behaviors and actions learned in the L1 often influence how they speak and act in the target language and culture (Aijuan, 2010). Since pragmatic knowledge in the L1 is generally learned in natural, real world contexts, rather than formally in classrooms, it can often be unconscious. Hence pragmatic transfer is especially common among L2 learners. Linguistic mistakes are often overlooked by native speakers when interacting with L2 learners because they recognize these mistakes are not intentional. Nonetheless, this same acceptance of mistakes is frequently not extended for pragmatic mistakes, because often it is not as clear to native speakers

of the target language and culture that they were unintentionally made. In these situations, L2 learners can appear to be rude, when that was not their intent.

When working with L2 learners, it is important to devote time and attention to pragmatics instruction, particularly to speech acts. One important example in pragmatics is compliments. Compliments are among the speech acts deserving of attention, as they are used to establish a sense of solidarity and good relationships among interlocutors. Compliments are defined “as actions that positively evaluate the appearance, personal qualities, or actions of a co-present participant” (Keisanen & Kärkkäinen, 2014, p. 650). Learners who do not understand how to voice solidarity with interlocutors will not be able to build or develop friendships in the L2 and have fewer opportunities interacting with L2 speakers (Geeslin & Long, 2014). Not all compliments or reactions to them are the same across cultures. The positive politeness acts of complimenting and responding to compliments can vary between cultures and these differences can lead to pragmatic failures (Wang, 2019). Awareness of the differences between compliment responses between Chinese and English is beneficial to be able to better understand these two cultures so that L2 learners will develop necessary pragmatic skills (Shi & Qu, 2018). Therefore, I will discuss Chinese compliment responses and English compliment responses in this paper and compare their similarities and differences.

### **Chinese Compliment Responses**

In teaching pragmatics and specifically compliments, it is important to consider the cultural context. To generalize, Chinese people have been influenced by Confucianism over thousands of years, which encourages people to be modest, especially in front of others who are older or have higher social status. Their responses to compliments are also impacted by Confucian ideals. Research on compliment responses in Chinese 20 years ago indicated that

Chinese people will automatically reject a compliment to avoid being considered impolite (Zuo 1988; Deng & Liu 1989; Tang & Zhang 2009). However, this trend has been changing - fewer and fewer people in China reject a compliment today. For instance, Guo et al.'s study (2012) showed that, in the Shanghai speech community, there is a new trend that people tend to accept compliments, and the tendency of not accepting the compliments is declining.

In the example from this study, Shanghai is the biggest city and a global financial hub in China which attracts many foreign visitors including those from Western countries. Hence, people in Shanghai have increased opportunities to interact with English speakers. Their behavior of accepting or appreciating compliments might be influenced by the Western culture during the interaction. Other contributing factors to the probability of acceptance/appreciation of compliments are: gender, social status, social distance, topic, age, and use of English.

Guo, Zhou, and Chow (2012) investigated the influence of several factors on compliment appreciation in the Chinese culture. Below I summarize their results related to these areas. Compared to males, females are more likely to accept a compliment. People tend to appreciate a compliment from those who have a higher social status than them, such as bosses, supervisors, and professors. Acceptance is promoted between friends but inhibited with the presence of a family member, likely because having family members around causes social pressure to behave traditionally and follow the rule of being modest. "Appearance and attire trigger the use of appreciation, whereas speakers tend not to respond with appreciation to compliments on performance possession and personality" (Guo et al., 2012).

Another influential factor in the study contributing to the probability of compliment acceptance is age. Younger generations have increased compliment acceptance for the reason that they are giving up modesty to maintain self-confidence, which is an essential value in

western countries (Chen & Yang, 2010). With the rapid development of technology, Chinese people, especially the younger generation who are better at using technological devices, know more about Western culture and are influenced by it. However, the older generation still resists this strategy and continues ascribing to humility (Guo et al., 2012).

The final factor in Guo et al.'s study was the difference of acceptance found between Chinese students in a U.S university and a Chinese university who have differing opportunities to use English. Chinese students of English studying abroad in an English-speaking country are more influenced by the English culture. They tend to use more acceptance and fewer non-acceptance strategies than Mandarin Chinese speakers (Tang & Zhang, 2009). Hao also did a study exploring further on Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) speakers' response to compliments, who were students in a U.S. university (2017). They have similar results with Tang and Zhang's study (2009) - students' behaviors were altered by the English culture. For instance, they respond to compliments on their appearance or clothing by showing appreciation and returning the compliment, which is similar to native English speakers (NES).

Compared to those who study abroad, students who study in China have less opportunity to interact with native English speakers or practice their English. Cheng (2011) presents an interesting study of Chinese EFL speakers who are students in a Chinese university who use an ignoring or giggling strategy to evade compliments on personality. The results suggested that their behaviors were mainly caused by their limited L2 processing capacity. Ignoring or giggling is one of the indirect strategies that Chinese speakers use. Besides using compliment acceptance (37%) and non-acceptance strategies (23%), 40% of Chinese speakers prefer indirection, which includes explanation, reassignment, invitation, questioning, smiling, non-response, and request (Guo et al., 2012).

Among all these indirection strategies, explanation is the second most frequently used strategy. One example would be: *Compliment: You look pretty today. Response: I woke up early to take a shower and put on make-up.* When people receive a compliment, even though they don't accept it, they still feel obligated to say something rather than just being silent. Chinese people's behavior of giving explanations to respond to a compliment was viewed differently by Yuan (2002). In this study, the strategy of explanation is labeled as acceptance instead of indirection, because the speaker provides a response and doesn't reject the compliment.

While explanation is the second most used response, the most frequently used acceptance response to a compliment by Chinese was '谢谢 xièxiè' ('thank you') (Herbert 1989; Holmes 1986). As mentioned before, more Chinese people are likely to accept a compliment now. However, Chinese ESL and EFL speakers overuse the response of "thank you" because they learn in ESL/EFL classes and textbooks that saying "thank you" is the proper way to accept compliments (Hao, 2017).

### **English Compliment Responses**

For native English speakers from a variety of cultures, responding to a compliment is complicated. Understanding the culture in a specific English speaking country will help ESL learners to choose appropriate words and actions in response to a compliment when they are in that country. Wang (2019), who challenges the generalization that English speakers always accept compliments, demonstrates that roughly one third of English responses are considered to be in the category of "acceptance". The other two out of three compliments are therefore returned with an answer other than the prescribed "thank you". Wang claims that compliments are offers of solidarity rather than praise and that a response by the addressee that is not simply

acceptance may be an approach to solidarity. This then makes the response a way to avoid self-praise and instead assert equality between the interlocutors.

The response of “thank you” is used in situations where it isn’t necessary to manage solidarity or carry on the conversation. In other words, interactions between strangers where the compliment is meant to make the addressee feel good would be an example where solidarity is not necessary. These situations would be between male-female and female-female interlocutors in expressing approval rather than solidarity. This illustrates as well that there are multiple factors that influence compliment responses in English societies.

In most English-speaking cultures, when compliments are given as a way to create solidarity and start conversations, it would be unacceptable to only respond with a *thank you*. Instead, for the response to be considered appropriate, the recipient should accept the compliment but then engage in more response strategies (Chen & Rau, 2011). Some of these strategies include “comment history” or “return”. An example of a “comment history” response to a compliment would be: *compliment: I really like your jacket. Response: I got it for my trip to Oregon last month.* For a “return” strategy the response would be: *your jacket is really cute too.* According to norms in English speaking countries, these types of response strategies leave the conversation open to continue rather than ending abruptly with a simple *thanks*.

If a compliment is denied by an English speaker, it usually occurs in close relationships (Kim, 2004). While this is less common in an English-speaking culture, it could be due to a similar reason as Chinese culture, to be modest or show humility. It is important to note that it happens more often in Chinese and in more contexts whereas it is less common in English-speaking cultures. Unlike Chinese, not acknowledging the compliment rarely happens in English and is always considered rude according to English speaking norms.

Even though Guo et al.'s study (2012) indicated that more and more Chinese speakers prefer accepting compliments rather than rejecting them, English speakers still used more acceptance and less indirection than non-acceptance in responding to compliments. This illustrates that while there are similarities in the trends of compliment responses, there are still differences between English and Chinese speaker norms that L2 English learners are trying to understand.

When native English speakers receive compliments on their ability or work, they show appreciation along with commenting strategies (Cheng, 2011). One example would be: *compliment: You did so well on your project presentation. Response: Thanks, I've been practicing it for hours.* This is similar to the responses by the recent trends of Chinese speakers in responding more frequently with explanations. Similarities such as this could be due to the influence of Western culture and English on other cultures such as Chinese. While these similarities can help prevent situations of pragmatic failure, there still are many instances where there is pragmatic transfer and thus failure among L2 learners.

### **Pragmatic Transfer/Failure**

Second language learners are challenged to separate the L1 language/culture from the L2 language/culture in interactions with target-language speakers to minimize pragmatic errors. Most studies look at forward pragmatic transfer, which refers to norms in the L1 affecting pragmatic behavior in the L2. Backward pragmatic transfer, on the other hand, happens when learners apply norms from the L2 in interactions in their L1. Cao (2016) reports a correlation of Chinese learners of English choosing more agreement strategies in their compliment responses in Chinese. This trend was more evident if the Chinese EFL speakers had a higher L2 proficiency



(Aijuan, 2010). This related to the current trends of Chinese generally becoming more accepting of compliments (Chen & Yang, 2010).

Chinese compliments are typically given to show authentic admiration, whereas English compliments are often used to start conversations (Chen& Rau, 2011). Chinese EFL learners who do not understand the intent behind an English speaker's compliment meant to start a conversation might respond with only 'thank you'. This short response could create awkwardness between the interlocutors and end the conversation rather than continue it as intended by the English speaker.

Because of the similarities that exist in English and Chinese complimenting norms, speakers might unconsciously mix the norms of both languages, leading to possible failures in the L2 (Wang, 2019). One example of this is a Chinese foreign language (CFL) learner awkwardly responding to a compliment '你做的饭很好吃' *The food you made is really good.* with an overconfident comment: '谢谢, 我也觉得' *Thanks, it was really good.* An EFL example of pragmatic failure would be responding to 'You always look fashionable. I like your style' with 'Thanks.' The Chinese EFL speaker follows both the English norm and the newer Chinese trend of accepting by saying thanks, but then resorts to the Chinese norm of modestly not saying more. The English norm is that the interlocutor is trying to start a conversation with a compliment and is expecting a return. The conversation is awkwardly halted by this short response.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

With steadily increasing interaction between speakers and learners of English and speakers and learners of Chinese globally, it is important for each group to understand the

differences and similarities between Chinese and English compliment responses. Knowing how to respond appropriately to compliments is vital for L2 learners so that they will be able to better interact in the target language and avoid being “fluent fools” (Bennett, 1997, p.1). Therefore, it is necessary for second language teachers to help their students know the cultural norms in China and English-speaking countries, as well as how to navigate these similarities and differences.

Complimenting is a speech act that can help create solidarity and build friendship between speakers. In a new environment with new people, giving compliments is a good way to make friends. Students need to be aware of the reasons for compliments, especially if these reasons are different from their L1 norms, as well as how to respond in ways that affirm solidarity. To aid students in this awareness, teachers should allow opportunities in the classroom for students to observe authentic complimenting situations, notice how complimenting is done in the target language, and practice giving and responding to compliments.

Even though in the past Chinese people have rejected compliments to be polite, this has become less of a common norm, especially among younger generations. They are now more likely to accept and appreciate compliments. This is a developing trend that has happened as globalization increases and technology advances, as there are more interactions with English speaking countries and influence from their language and culture. As these changes in language trends occur, it is critical that teachers follow suit and evolve their teaching accordingly.

Although more Chinese tend to accept compliments more often than they have in the past, English speakers will still tend to use more acceptance strategies. English speakers from many different cultures also tend to be more direct, and norms of the language dictate that they must respond to compliments in some way to be considered polite. Chinese will be more indirect and sometimes will not acknowledge the compliment at all. This is one of the most significant

differences between Chinese and English cultures of which learners should be conscious in order to avoid pragmatic failure in the L2.

Many factors influence Chinese peoples' acceptance to compliments, such as gender, social status, social distance, topics, age, and use of English. By comparison, fewer factors influence compliment responses in English. These factors are limited to the relationship between the interlocutors such as whether they are strangers, males speaking with females, or females interacting with other females. Consequently, these factors need to be taken into consideration when interacting in the second language, as well as for teachers to bring attention to them when teaching this speech act.

Chinese and English speakers have different reasons for using the acceptance strategy. Yang claims that CSs are reluctant to accept direct compliments in order to adhere to their traditional ideals of humility (Yang 1987), while Billmyer explains NESs resort to positive elaboration to facilitate further interchange and social interaction (Billmyer 1990). Along with acceptance, native English speakers also use other strategies such as "comment history" or "return", while Chinese speakers prefer using "explanation". As both languages employ other strategies along with acceptance, teachers ought to teach not only how to say "thanks" in the target language but also how to use other strategies in responding to compliments. This is essential for language learners because "thanks" as a blanket response is not appropriate to all compliments and in all situations.

People's behaviors in their L2 can be impacted by their L1 or vice versa, which may cause pragmatic failure. For this reason, the most universal implication that is essential to all target languages is the necessity to acquire pragmatic knowledge of speech acts. Nevertheless, the need for pragmatic competence is often overlooked in L2 classrooms.

Many arguments may be cited for why this shortcoming: time constraints, lack of pragmatic knowledge, curriculum requirements, textbooks with insufficiently incorporated pragmatics, or even the unrecognized need for pragmatics. However, I am convinced language that teachers of all proficiency levels need to find ways to integrate pragmatics in their teaching so that students will not only know the language, but also know how to appropriately use the language in real world contexts.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

## Creativity in Language Learning

### **Introduction**

For my annotated bibliography, I chose to focus on creativity in language learning. This paper is a collaborative work, which is accomplished by my peer Emma Duncan and I. The content and structure of the paper has been changed since it was submitted to a MSLT course previously. As a language learner, I have often found myself participating in activities and assignments for which the task is simply to fill in information or produce a specific sentence conveying a specific meaning. Rarely have I been expected or encouraged to be creative or use the L2 to express my thoughts the way I use my L1. Creativity is nonetheless necessary to communication.

Though creativity seems to be an inherent part of language use in the L1, in that native speakers must be creative to use language to accurately express their thoughts, language learning tasks in the L2 classroom often fail to allow room for unscripted or unpredictable elements. Ignoring creativity, language lessons and activities tend to focus on form or on meaning that doesn't require moving beyond our current comfort zones or using the language in new and unfamiliar ways. For this project, I wanted to learn more about the importance of creativity and its application in language acquisition. Creativity is not only present but also an essential element in facilitating an open and curious relationship to others (Papalazarou, 2015). For this annotated bibliography, I examined why creativity is important for language acquisition from a theoretical standpoint, and looked at research on implementing creative tasks in the classroom, the correlation between creativity and language skills, and practices for enhancing creativity.

### **Theoretical Background**

The theoretical lens through which I looked at creativity in language learning in this annotated bibliography is the interaction approach (Long, 1996). The interaction approach focuses on input, output, and feedback in second language acquisition (SLA). Scholars of SLA generally agree that interaction and learning are strongly connected. The interaction approach accounts for learning through exposure to, production of, and feedback on the target language (Gass & Mackey, 2014). This approach assumes that communicative pressures stimulate language learning and focuses on the mechanisms and relationship between communication and learning (Gass & Mackey, 2014). Because I value interaction in my classroom, I found this approach useful, because it views interaction, or the conversations that learners engage in, as important because this is the context where learners engage in negotiation of meaning until comprehension is established (Gass & Mackey, 2014). The negotiation of meaning is where communication and learning take place.

The three components of the interaction approach – input, output, and feedback – can be summed up with the concept of negotiation of meaning, which is defined as

The process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved.

(Gass & Mackey, 2014, p. 187)

Acquisition is facilitated by the connection of input and output (Gass & Mackey, 2014). During negotiation of meaning, a learner's attention is directed to problems or gaps in linguistic abilities and to new lexical and grammatical constructions, promoting development in the L2 (Gass & Mackey, 2014).

For the purpose of examining creativity in second language acquisition, output is the most relevant component of the interaction approach. Output is important to language acquisition in that it forces learners to go from a semantic (focused on meaning) to a syntactic (focused on form) use of language (Gass & Mackey, 2014). This means that learners go from simply understanding the meaning of input to gaining the complete grammatical understanding that is necessary for appropriate production. Another function of output is in the testing of hypotheses about the target language – learners may use utterances they are unsure about as a way to “test” the language and see if their output is comprehensible or not (Gass & Mackey, 2014).

When discussing creativity in writing, the concept of modified output, learner’s reformulation of previous utterances which results in more accurate communication, plays a central role. Producing modified output, a learner attempts to use the language at a level beyond his or her current knowledge or abilities (Gass & Mackey, 2014). Output that stretches the linguistic resources of the learner is considered to be the most valuable. This is where creativity and creative tasks become important, in encouraging language learners to leave the path of least resistance and to use language that may be beyond their abilities and comfort zone. In this annotated bibliography, I will now turn to an overview of several studies examining the role that creativity plays in language learning.

### **Creativity for academic and foreign-language achievement**

**Carter (2004)** makes a case for creativity being an inherent, natural part of language (including the L1). The author examined spoken discourse and explored the creativity in samples of everyday spoken English. He investigated whether there are differences in creativity between spoken and written language and whether particular creative patterns can be identified in spoken language (Carter, 2004).



The data from the study came from the CANCODE corpus at the University of Nottingham in the UK. Samples were taken from a corpus totaling 5 million words with data from between 1993 and 2001. In the samples, all of which are examples of casual, everyday speech, the author finds several patterns of creativity, including puns, plays on words, morphological inventiveness, and repetition (Carter, 2004).

The author concludes that creative use of language is prevalent in casual speech, may be used consciously or subconsciously, and serves multiple purposes, some being non-pragmatic embellishments and some fulfilling fundamental communicative purposes (Carter, 2004). The use of playful or creative language may confer pleasure, display identity, indicate membership in a group, or establish intimacy.

The examples examined by Carter occurred in informal settings, which are the contexts encountered by most speakers most often. Based on the evidence presented, I can conclude that creativity is an important and inherent part of language use. It would make sense, then, that creativity is also important in a second language setting. Creativity should be a focus of second language teachers, who should make an effort to foster creativity and implement creative tasks in the L2 classroom to encourage the development of creative language use, as such a skill is vital to the ability to use the L2 successfully in unrehearsed, natural settings.

**Chik's (2017)** study confirmed the importance of creativity in learning a second language. This study involved adults who choose to learn foreign languages on their own and the role that creativity plays in their motivation and success. Chik investigated why some adults start learning foreign languages beyond the classroom and how they create spaces for their foreign language learning. Such learners often pursue 'serious leisure' – leisure activities which are complex, captivating, and challenging (Chik, 2017). The ways in which learners navigate such

opportunities for learning are quite diverse, ranging from reading newspapers in the target language to playing language games to participating in social media in the target language. When language learners autonomously construct their own learning opportunities, creativity is a shaping force (Chik, 2017).

The qualitative study looked at three undergraduate students who participated in and blogged about a month-long language-learning project. Each participant chose a foreign language with which they had no previous experience and created their own learning plans. Throughout the project, participants updated publicly accessible blogs with their progress. Three interviews, concerning language learning history and learning experiences, were conducted with each participant over the course of the study.

The results showed that the participants all created learning spaces that showed creative ideas such as language games, social media and reading in the target language, indicating that creativity is a determining factor in whether a learner will stick to a language or give it up (Chik, 2017). The author concluded that to learn a language autonomously, creativity is necessary for making the essential language learning spaces.

Creativity is important not only in autonomous learning, but in a classroom setting as well. One study (**Pishghadam, Khodadady, & Zabihi, 2011**) examined the role of creativity in L2 learning achievement. The aim of the study was to test for a correlation between creativity, learners' general academic achievement, and achievement in a foreign language (Pishghadam, 2011). The participants in the study were undergraduate EFL students in Iran. A questionnaire measuring creativity was administered to the participants and the data were analyzed to determine whether a correlation exists between creativity, foreign language achievement, and academic achievement (Pishghadam, 2011).

The author reported a significant correlation between creativity and academic achievement as well as between creativity and English language achievement. He concluded that language teachers should intentionally provide an environment that fosters the development of creative abilities (Pishghadam, 2011). This can be accomplished by creating a safe environment for asking questions, holding discussions, and solving problems through exploration. In addition to discussion, various games or storytelling activities can be helpful.

To develop creativity, instructors can use activities such as: brainstorming, wordplay, stories, games, and puzzles (Pishghadam, 2011). One example of creative language task is implementing art into language teaching. Teacher can create a story line and students draw a picture based on what they hear from the teacher. It can practice and improve their listening and comprehension skills. Psychological safety and psychological freedom are essential conditions that learners need in order to be creative. The researcher concludes that creativity is an important factor in language acquisition. Students who engage in learning tasks that allow them to be more creative are more likely to achieve success in a foreign language, as well as in academics in general.

### **Creative tasks for the L2 classroom**

A study by **Tin (2012)** also examined the importance of creative tasks in learning a second language with a focus on applying constraints to language learning tasks in order to push learners out of their comfort zones and away from the language they are comfortable using. However, Tin avoided offering “too much” freedom, seeing it as counterproductive in allowing students to repeat past successful experiences rather than attempting to use more advanced or unfamiliar language. It is thus important to challenge students and to have guidelines. To increase motivation in students for using more complex language, language learning tasks need

to include features of creativity – they need to require the construction of unknown meanings and incorporate constraints to encourage creative language use. Three examples of creative language learning tasks with constraints are provided in the study: 1) setting up constraints in controlled practice tasks, 2) setting up constraints in brainstorming tasks, and 3) setting up constraints in free role play tasks. The author concludes that creative tasks give learners the opportunity to explore the language and constraints help stretch their language and knowledge as they use it to make unknown meaning, resulting in modified output and more effective communication (Tin, 2012).

**Wong and Moorhouse's study (2018)** explored a specific method of involving creativity to facilitate language learning, writing for an audience. The study addressed the fact that creativity is often neglected in English language writing classrooms, even though creative language use is a common feature of everyday English and important to the writing process (Wong & Moorhouse, 2018). Often, students have one shot at writing, under test-like conditions, which narrows the purpose of the writing and shifts focus onto accuracy and away from creativity. Because there is no audience or social purpose, writing assignments are seen simply as school tasks that must be completed (Wong & Moorhouse, 2018). Audiences, whether real or imaginary, provide context for the negotiation of meaning.

The authors investigated the use of blogs in a writing class and examined the effect of blogging on students' desire for creativity and awareness of the audience. Fifth-grade English learners in a Hong Kong primary school participated in a year-long blogging project. Comments made by the students on each other's blogs and a pre- and post-surveys were analyzed to determine the effects of the blogging project.

For their various assignments, students published drafts of their writing on a blog, which other students commented on. The aim was to heighten awareness of the audience and increase desire to write creatively through feedback from multiple peers, without the pressure of receiving a grade from the teacher. This was expected to help learners to move toward higher skills, concepts, and levels of understanding (Wong & Moorhouse, 2018). It also allowed students to focus on what they wanted to say, rather than how they should say it.

Results showed that throughout the year-long project, students experienced a shift in desire to share their work with peers, to become more creative, and to elaborate on ideas (Wong & Moorhouse, 2018). This study shows that it is important to create opportunities in the classroom for students to foster their own creativity, which helps them to strive for modified output and expand their linguistic skills.

**Arshavskaya (2015)** also found that creative writing assignments can enhance second language learners' motivation to improve their writing skills and support their creativity. She designed a study to test the hypothesis that implementing creative writing assignments in a second language writing class can engage less motivated students. Specifically, she focused on participants' "critical consciousness", their "attitudes towards the use of creative writing activities" and their "perceptions of the use of critical pedagogy" within an L2 writing course (Arshavskaya, 2015, p.3). Nine international undergraduate students participated in the study, who enrolled in an academic ESL writing class at a southwestern American university. Creative writing assignments, such as a journal (e.g., A Day in the Life of a North Korean) and a letter (e.g., A Letter to an LGBT Friend), were designed by Arshavskaya. Participants also completed a survey about their attitude toward creative writing assignments and critical pedagogy at the end of the semester.

### Analysis of the creative writing assignments and the end-of-semester survey

indicated that the majority of the participants reported enhanced empathy and critical consciousness through creative writing activities. All participants found creative writing beneficial and engaging, and some of them noted increased fluency and confidence as L2 writers. Most of the participants agreed that creative writing activities improved their engagement and confidence, as well as their attitude regarding critical pedagogy. Some of them stated that being able to see things from a different perspective was a good experience, others mentioned the topics (e.g., a letter to an LGBT friend who doesn't have parents' approval of this friendship) were depressing and they preferred more positive topics. The small sample size (nine participants) contributed limited the study's generalizability. Students seemed to report an increase in motivation. Overall, the L2 learners in this study enjoyed engaging in creative writing activities and gained benefits from them.

Creative writing practices not only increase L2 learners' motivation in writing but can also improve their written expression skills. **Turkben (2019)** conducted a study aimed at examining the effect of creative writing practices on upper-intermediate (B2) level students' written expression skills. Forty-nine B2 level students (of whom 24 were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 25 to the control group) participated in the study, all enrolled in university-level EFL courses in Turkey. Creative writing activities were implemented in the experimental group, while approaches from the standard curriculum's teacher guide were implemented in the control group. Pre-tests and post-tests were completed by both experimental and control groups. Karatay and Tonyali's (2010) "creative writing evaluation scale" was used to assess creative writing activities and measure writing skills in the pretest and posttest. T-tests were completed by comparing the experimental group with the control group.

According to the results, there was a significant difference between the post-test scores of the experimental group and the control group. Specifically, creative writing practices were effective in improving L2 learners' written expression skills in the areas of text structure and organization, punctuation, and presentation (Turkben, 2019). The author concludes that teaching methods "such as active learning, collaborative learning, or creative drama-based activities should be used effectively to improve students' writing skills" (Turkben, 2019, p. 17).

According to the two studies above, L2 learners improve their writing skills through creative writing assignments. L2 learners' writing skills can also be affected or predicted by individual creativity. **Nosratinia and Razavi (2016)** conducted a study on the interaction between EFL learners' writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency, and learner's degree of creativity. They asked two research questions: (1) "Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' creativity and writing accuracy, fluency, and complexity?" (p. 1044); and (2) "How much can EFL learners' creativity predict their writing complexity?" The participants of the study were 185 intermediate EFL learners from three different schools in Tehran. Two English teachers participated in the study as raters of the writing samples. Participants were asked to complete a creativity questionnaire (50 minutes) and two composition writing tests on different topics (50 minutes).

The learners' writing was scored for accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Pearson's Product-moment correlation coefficient and linear regression used to analyze the data. Regarding the first research question, the results indicated significant relationships between EFL learners' creativity and writing accuracy, writing fluency, and writing complexity. Regarding the second research question, the data showed that creativity significantly predicts writing accuracy, fluency, and complexity. The findings of the study highlight the importance of creativity in

developing EFL learners' writing skills. The authors address both students and teachers. They advise EFL learners to be more creative in their learning activities and EFL teachers to design course material and syllabi considering the significance of creativity in L2 learning and incorporate creativity in class activities and materials. The results of this study bring up a question, "Since EFL learners' creativity plays an important role in their writing skills, is it possible to enhance L2 learners' creative thinking skills?" Further research is needed in this area.

### **Creativity in thinking skills**

**Gursoy and Bağ's (2018)** study addressed the question above. The purpose of their study was to determine whether EFL learners' creative thinking skills can be improved through training that emphasizes the effectiveness of audio and visual stimuli. Researchers also measured participants' development of creative thinking subskills (fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration) with training. Twenty-four secondary school students participated in the study; 12 of them were randomly assigned to the visual group, and the rest to the audio group. Pretests and posttests were completed by the participants so that their creative thinking capacity before and after training could be compared. Both pretests and posttests aim to measure participants' creative abilities in figural, written, and oral aspects.

Statistical analysis was performed on the data collected through the pretests and posttests. They found a significant difference between the pretest and posttest in terms of the development of EFL learners' creative thinking skills through 6 weeks of training, or creative thinking assignments. According to the data, the visual stimuli group exhibited a greater improvement in creative thinking skills. Furthermore, among the four subskills, significant differences were found between pretest and posttest results, both for fluency and originality, but not between flexibility and elaboration. This study demonstrates that visual and audio creative thinking



prompts can facilitate EFL learner's creative thinking capacity. The visual prompts were more effective than audio prompts in improving learners' creative thinking skills.

Similar to Gursoy and Bağ's (2018) study, the purpose of **Sehic's (2017)** mixed-methods case study was to "investigate the effects of English learning on creative thinking skills in the domains of fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration as measured with the Alternate Uses Test" (p. 1). In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data were collected and analyzed in this study, which provided more detailed information about the effects of English learning on creative thinking on the four domains. College-level students who completed a second language course were compared to college students without second language learning. Both groups completed pretests and posttests (quantitative data) and face-to-face interviews (qualitative data).

The results indicate that ESL participants scored higher in the domains of flexibility, originality, and elaboration in the posttest than the pretest. However, their scores in the domain of fluency did not increase, which was inconsistent with the results of Gursoy and Bağ's (2018) study. Based on both the quantitative and qualitative data, the ESL program/ English learning has a positive effect on improving L2 learners' creative thinking skills capacity in domains of flexibility, originality, and elaboration.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, creativity is a new educational trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Creative thinking is a key characteristic of second language learners in particular. Being able to think creatively positively influences L2 learners' success in effectively communicating with people and achieving global collaboration. In other words, creativity plays an important role in second language acquisition. The articles examined in this annotated bibliography indicate that there is a

correlation between creativity and L2 learners' achievement in second language acquisition to a certain extent. Some researchers are in agreement that learner's creativity has an essential impact on their language speaking skills as well as writing skills in terms of writing accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Others conclude that creative thinking skills can be improved through audio and visual stimuli which have been proved to enhance L2 learners' creative thinking skills in domains of flexibility, originality, and elaboration. They show it is never too late to boost creativity in the classroom at any level or age; even adult learners' creative thinking skills can be promoted through creativity training (Tsai, 2013).

Future studies will no doubt research what other types of experiences can possibly enhance creative thinking skills. In addition, assignments such as creative writing tasks can increase learners' motivation to develop their writing skills. Such tasks also boosts their confidence in second language writing. Furthermore, creative tasks provide learners the opportunity to see things from a different perspective, thus promoting empathy. Second language educators should pay attention to implementing creativity in course instructional material, which is a vital factor for L2 learners to successfully acquire a second language (Maley & Peachey, 2015). To improve learners' second language proficiency and physical and cognitive engagement, teachers should assign more creative tasks, and students should be encouraged to think creatively.

## LOOKING FORWARD

During my many years of education, I have been jumping from one professional field to another. After I struggled for a long time with what I should pursue for my career, I finally came to realize, after gaining some teaching experience, that my desire is to be a language teacher. I am grateful to be a member of the MSLT program, which has provided me a lot of opportunities to obtain theoretical knowledge and practical experience in language teaching and learning. While in the program, I had the opportunity to be a Chinese instructor, teaching younger learners as well as students at the college level, both in person and on line. These enriching experiences facilitated my professional development as a Chinese teacher. I believe the more teaching experience I gain, the higher my level of professional knowledge and skills will become.

Therefore, looking forward, I would like to be a teacher in a Chinese dual language immersion (DLI) program. This way, I can continue teaching Chinese. My goal of being a Chinese teacher is not only teaching the language, but also introducing and showing Chinese culture to others. Research that I have read in the program has greatly influenced my perspective of the importance of culture in second language acquisition. Hopefully, while I am teaching, I can also have the opportunity to become a part of further culture-related research in Chinese teaching and learning, and implement its implications in my classroom.

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