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## Teaching Communication with a Foreign Accent

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## Teaching Communication with a Foreign Accent

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### Abstract

This study examines problems encountered by foreign instructors teaching in American colleges. Fifteen Chinese born instructors teaching communication in American colleges are asked to answer a questionnaire containing twelve open-ended questions. Recurring themes are coded and answers are organized into three categories: cultural difference, linguistic level of understanding, and relationship development. The three categories are used to explain problems that are experienced by foreign instructors in the United States of America.

More than forty thousand international students are enrolling in American colleges every year, and the number is increasing (Gorsuch, 2003; International Student Guide, 2003-2004). Many of these students returned to their home countries after completing their degree, the rest of them joined the various workforces in the United States of America. While as sojourners studying in American colleges, these international students have to cope with various problems caused by cultural differences, academically and socially. Thomas and Althen (1989) identified some of the major adjustment problems encountered by international students, including the initial adjustment to the new culture, academic difficulty due to the novelty of the academic system, cross-cultural gender relationships, social isolation, depression and paranoia, and stressed relationships with host nationals. These problems often lead to the symptom of "culture shock" (Oberg, 1960) which may include "language shock" (Smalley, 1963), "role shock" (Byrnes, 1966; Higbee, 1969), "education shock" (Hoff, 1979), and "transition shock" (Bennett, 1977).

Abundant research has studied the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of international students. Among them, many dealt with problems faced by international teaching assistants (ITA) (Baily, Pialorsi, & Zukowski/Faust, 1984; Bresnahan & Cai, 2000; Franck & Desousa, 1982; Pica & Finger, 1990; Ross & Krider, 1992; Rubin & Smith, 1990). According to Shaw and Garate (1984), in addition to the common problems faced by international students in the adjustment process, those additional problems encountered by ITA can be classified into three categories: language skills, communicative competence, and pedagogic skills.

Language skills refer to the ability to express meanings in the content area ITA has to deal with, including class management, students counseling, relationship development, and information sharing. Communicative competence refers to the ability to get along with host nationals in different social or special situations. Communicative competence is closely related to the concept of culture (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Wiseman, 2003). Due to cultural differences, the mismatch of expectations between ITA and American students often occurs. Pedagogic skills deal with teaching approaches ITA use in the classroom. The three elements are interwoven and can be used to assess the degree of success on ITA's performance.

Based on difficulties encountered by ITA, various programs have been designed to help ITA overcome the problems (Altinsel & Rittenberg, 1996; Chism, 1987; Civikly & Muchisky, 1991; [ **This last one is not in the references**] Gaskill & Brinton, 1984; Stansfield & Ballard, 1984; Torkelson, 1992; Zukowski/Faust, 1984). These programs often take two forms: an intensive one- or two-week orientation program at the beginning of every semester and an ongoing program offered through the academic year.

Gaskill and Brinton (1984) indicated that the intensive one- or two-week program aims to detail aspects of the involved student population, the rationale for the syllabus, simulated testing situations, communication exercises of a role-playing and problem-solving nature, student evaluation, and so on. Rice (1984) pointed out that the academic-year program is designed to meet objectives such as: (1) to improve the language proficiency, including oral, aural, reading and writing skills, (2) to learn classroom teaching and interaction techniques, (3) to understand educational and philosophical bases for curricula, and (4) to understand respective roles of the faculty and ITA, and the university system that affects ITA in dealing with university administrative procedures, matters of grading and testing, and general communications network in the university community.

While many studies focused on the issue of ITA, very few extended the research to examine teaching experiences of full-time foreign instructors in American colleges. Because a portion of ITA was hired by different colleges as instructors after they completed the doctoral degree, would the problems experienced by ITA continue to affect them as a full-time instructor? It was the purpose of this study to investigate the teaching experience of full-time foreign instructors in American colleges.

Wang (1993) reported that those problems experienced by ITA in American colleges still exist for those become full-time instructors. However, the degree and content of the problem may vary. For example, the requirement of basic language proficiency on the aspects of fluency, grammar and expression basically is no longer a problem for foreign instructors. The instructor's language accent, however, continues to trouble American students.

Wang (1993) conducted an in-depth interview to examine problems experienced by foreign instructors in American colleges by using three categories of questions: Using the American English, encountering the campus culture, and establishing rapport with students. She found that the expectation of American students on the language proficiency remains a challenge to foreign instructors. However, the challenge is based on the ability to use English idiomatic and colloquial expressions.

Moreover, the campus culture continues to be the most difficult part for foreign instructors to adjust, especially to treat students on the basis of equal status and the way to handle the occasional mistake made in the presentation of class materials. Finally, foreign instructors have difficulties in accepting the professional-client relationship in academic life. They tend to feel that the relationship between American students and foreign instructors is

superficial and unsatisfactory.

To extend and improve Wang's research this study went a step further by exploring the foreign instructors' teaching experience in American colleges from three other perspectives: Classroom encountering, cultural impact, and evaluation and interaction with colleagues. Classroom encountering deals with foreign instructors' feelings on handling teaching, expectation, and students' feedback in the classroom. Cultural impact deals with foreign instructors' perception on cultural differences that affect their performance in the classroom. Finally, evaluation and interaction with colleagues is concerned with teaching experiences.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were drawn from members of the Association for Chinese Communication Studies (ACCS) which was formed in 1991. All members of the ACCS were in the discipline of Communication Studies. Eighteen of them were Chinese born (from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) and full-time instructors in American colleges. These instructors were target of the study. After the invitation, fifteen (M = 9, F = 6) instructors agreed to join the project. Among them, eleven were teaching in 4-year public college and four in 4-year private college. Teaching load was three courses per semester for ten participants and four courses for five of them. The three most common courses taught by participants were intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, and oral communication. The average age was 34.54, and the average number of years teaching in the college is five. All participants were in the assistant professor level.

### **Procedure and Instrument**

In order to obtain in-depth information from participants, a free-response questionnaire which contains twelve open-ended questions was designed (see Appendix 1). The twelve questions cover three conceptual categories of foreign instructor's teaching experience, including classroom encountering (5 items), cultural impact (3 items), and evaluation and interaction with colleagues (4 items). Questions for demographic information and degree of satisfaction on teaching were also included.

The questionnaire was mailed to respondents who were asked to return the questionnaire within four weeks. The survey took about one hour and half to complete. After a follow-up letter at the third week reminding them of answering the questions, all respondents returned their questionnaire on time.

### **Data Analysis**

The information from the twelve open-ended questions was coded and assorted into three categories: Classroom encountering, cultural impact, and evaluation and interaction with colleagues. Classroom encountering includes the hardest thing to adjust to, the most frustrated thing, the most satisfactory moment, the most embarrassing moment, and the effect of non-English accent in the classroom. Cultural impact includes the effect of different cultural background, the major cultural clash, and students' treatment of the cultural difference. The evaluation and interaction with colleagues include perception on teaching evaluation, sharing teaching experiences with colleagues, colleagues' understanding on teaching, and application of teaching experiences to colleagues. The recurring themes from each question were

organized and coded based on these categories. The final step was to analyze all recurring themes and draw a common pattern for explanation.

#### Results

The findings of this study were presented in three major categories consisting of twelve questions, followed by recurring themes.

#### I. Classroom encountering:

Q1: The hardest thing to adjust to.

##### Recurring themes:

1. The lack of motivation from students to seek excellence.
2. To deal with students' expectation on my teaching style and grade decision.
3. To pick up students' usage of slang and idioms.

Q2: The most frustrated thing.

##### Recurring themes:

1. Students don't study hard enough.
2. The lack of respect from students to instructor.
3. Students attribute their classroom incompetence to instructor foreign background.
4. Students are arguing for their grades.

Q3: The most satisfactory moment.

##### Recurring themes:

1. Students' positive feedback on instructor's teaching.
2. Students show appreciation and are eager to learn.

Q4: The most embarrassing moment.

##### Recurring themes:

1. Not able to understand or misunderstanding students' questions or language.
2. Unable to pronounce students' name correctly.
3. Students ridicule the instructor's accent or mispronunciation.

Q5: The effect of non-English accent.

##### Recurring themes:

1. Have to use blackboard more often.
2. Students have problem understanding especially at the beginning of the class.
3. Some students think the instructor is less qualified as a speech teacher.

#### II. Cultural Impact:

Q6: The effect of cultural background.

##### Recurring themes:

1. Mismatch of worldview and expectations between instructors and students.
2. Enrich teaching by providing students different perspectives.
3. Can be more neutral toward controversial issues.

Q7: The major cultural clash.

##### Recurring themes:

1. The high expectation of learning from instructors.
2. The lack of respect to instructors.

Q8: The effect of cultural differences.

##### Recurring themes:

1. Students are curious about me and my way of teaching.
2. Foreign instructors have to try very hard to convert students' perception at the first several weeks of class regarding cultural differences.
3. Students tend to use more formal language to interact with foreign instructors.

### III. Evaluation and interaction with colleagues

Q9: Teaching evaluation from student.

Recurring themes:

1. Basically receive a fair evaluation from students.
2. Some students show biases in the evaluation.
3. Fair evaluation on categories of preparation and knowledge; less fair on making the content interesting and giving difficult exams.

Q10: Share teaching experience with American colleagues.

1. Pretty often.
2. Average 2-3 times every semester.

Q11: Colleagues' understanding on my teaching.

1. They show respect and are nice to me, but they'll never truly understand my problems.

Q12: The application of teaching experience to American colleagues:

1. Some teaching problems are commonly shared; some are difficult to apply to colleagues due to cultural difference.

Sex and the degree of satisfaction were also analyzed in the study. The average degree of satisfaction was 4.0 out of 5.0 scale. There was no significant difference between male and female on the degree of satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

After carefully examined recurring themes of the twelve questions, three new categories can be classified: Cultural difference, linguistic level of understanding, and relationship development. Similar to research on ITA, cultural difference remains the major difficulty foreign instructors encounter in teaching communication in the United States of America. Problems caused by cultural difference almost penetrate into each recurring theme. The results show that the major cultural problem between foreign instructors and American students is the perception on learning process. Foreign instructors tend to complain that American students do not work hard enough academically.

Two potential problems from this perception discrepancy are: (1) students often argue for a grade, and (2) in the worse case, it enhances the students' biases by attributing their incompetence to instructor's foreign background. Moreover, the cultural difference also leads foreign instructors to perceive that their colleagues may not understand those problems they experience in the classroom, even if their colleagues treat them nicely and politely. Nevertheless, foreign instructors acknowledge that a potentially positive influence of cultural difference may enrich the learning process and broaden students' perspectives.

Unlike ITA, basic linguistic skills such as grammar and common expressions are not problems for foreign instructors. Instead, the deep meanings of students' language which are imbedded in cultural components are the barriers that the foreign instructors try to overcome. The results indicate that those culturally bound language barriers include slang, idioms, and

jokes.

Due to physical and cultural differences, a satisfactory relationship seems less likely to be developed between foreign instructors and American students. The results show that American students may be curious about foreign instructors and the way they teach, but it seems built on a negative basis. Foreign instructors often have to take several weeks to conciliate students' curiosity, successfully or unsuccessfully. Moreover, American students tend to use formal language to interact with foreign instructors. Formal interaction is usually difficult for people to establish a personal relationship.

Finally, despite all the problems foreign instructors face in the classroom and students' biases in the evaluation process, most of the foreign instructors consider that they are fairly evaluated by students. The high degree of satisfaction of teaching ( $M = 4.0$ ) in a 5.0 Likert scale is consistent with the findings.

### Discussion

The findings of this study provide a further step toward the understanding of existing problems that non-native communication instructors encountered in American colleges. The three major patterns of problems identified are cultural difference, linguistic level of understanding, and relationship development.

Among the three patterns, cultural difference is probably the major source hindering foreign instructors from understanding some of the special linguistic meanings and establishing a satisfactory relationship with students or colleagues. Different cultural perceptions always lead to distrust, misunderstanding or personal biases (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Samover & Porter, 2003). According to Brenahan (1989), due to the cultural differences, American students tend to distrust those people who are unlike them and they want to avoid all contact with foreign instructors in terms of interpersonal relationships, job related encounters or classroom interaction.

The findings as well indicate that, like international teaching assistants, foreign instructors need help from American academic institutions. In addition to providing training programs to assist foreign instructors to understand the campus culture, teaching American students to understand and appreciate people from different cultures is also a way to help foreign instructors adjust to the American culture. This reinforces the need for inclusion of cultural diversity not only in the college level but throughout a person's education. Only through the education of cultural diversity can the contradiction between American students and foreign instructors be solved. Future research should try to design a program that fits this goal.

Finally, there are several limitations of this study. First, all the participants are Chinese descendants. It is necessary for future research to examine whether the Chinese experience can be generalized to other ethnic groups. Second, the results of this study are confined in the discipline of Communication Studies. Future research may compare the research findings from different disciplines. Lastly, increasing the number of participants may make the results more reliable.

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### **Appendix A**

1. What is the hardest thing to adjust to?
2. What is the most frustrating thing?
3. What is the most satisfactory moment?
4. What is the most embarrassing moment?
5. Does your non-English accent affect your teaching? If yes, please explain.
6. Does your cultural background affect your teaching? If yes, please explain.
7. What is the major cultural clash between you and your American students?
8. Do you think American students treat you differently because of your cultural background?  
If yes, please explain.
9. Do you think you receive a fair evaluation from your American students?
10. Do you share your teaching experiences with your American colleagues? If yes, how often?
11. Do you think your American colleagues understand your problems in teaching? Why?
12. Do you think that your teaching experiences are applicable to your American colleagues and vice versa?