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Teaching English Language Learners from China

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Teaching English Language Learners from China

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University of New Hampshire

Abby Pavlik

Part I: Introduction

The online version of *Ethnologue* estimates that there are 845 million native speakers of Mandarin Chinese, with the primary country for the language being the People's Republic of China (http://www.ethnologue.org/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=size, Table 3). This is more than twice the estimated number of native speakers of Spanish, the language with the second highest number of native speakers. In a day when English is being learned as a second language by more people than ever before and China is quickly modernizing and Westernizing, there are many Mandarin speakers who want to learn English. The numbers demonstrate a need for ESL (English as a Second Language)/EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers who are well equipped for working with Mandarin-speaking Chinese English language learners (ELLs).

In this paper, I intend to address the question of how best to teach this particular group of ELLs, with a special emphasis on those that are in the United States. I will address this central question by considering the following three sub-questions:

1. What are some key differences between Standard Mandarin Chinese and Standard English?
2. How does life outside the classroom in China differ from that in America?
3. How does the culture of the classroom in China differ from that in America?

This paper will be organized around these three questions, with each one as the basis for one section of the paper. Understanding some important differences between Chinese and English will help teachers decide when and how to teach what. It will also help them sympathize with their students and understand them when they make otherwise mysterious errors. Understanding the differences between life outside the classroom in China and America can help American ESL

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teachers ease their students into this culture. Understanding the differences between the classroom cultures of the two countries will help both ESL and EFL teachers conduct their classes with the least misunderstanding and the most sympathy between teacher and students.

While I expect the information in this paper to be useful to all teachers who work with Chinese ELLs, my focus will be on finding and providing information for ESL teachers in the USA. I hope that EFL teachers in East Asia, content-area teachers in US public schools, and content professors in US universities will also find a few useful things in these pages. If an American teacher works with Chinese ELLs in *any* of these capacities and is not very familiar with the Mandarin language or with Chinese culture (in and outside the classroom), there will be at least a few things in this paper that he will find informative and useful.

Part II: Language Differences

There are a few important similarities between Mandarin and English. First, they share the common trait of being more or less analytic languages – that is, they have few inflectional morphemes. Further, they share a handful of somewhat similar-sounding words due to a limited amount of borrowing that has occurred between the two languages, largely in the realms of food and technology. Finally, the most fundamental and prevalent word order in both languages is subject-verb-object (SVO). So much for the similarities – otherwise, these two languages are complete strangers.

Two differences between these languages are evident to anyone who has had any contact with both of them. The first is that they have different writing systems. Written English, of course, is alphabetic; written Chinese is logographic. Happily for us, pinyin is also now widely taught in China alongside characters, so our Chinese ELLs will already be familiar with our alphabet. However, the sound-to-letter correspondence is not wholly consistent between pinyin and English spelling. This would be quite impossible for two reasons: one is that pinyin is purely phonetic, while English spelling is influenced by a host of historical factors; the other is that the phoneme inventory (the set of consonant and vowel sounds that carry meaning) of Chinese does not align with that of English, so the same letters must carry different burdens for the different languages.

The second immediately recognizable difference between these languages is their vocabulary. They share no cognates (words sharing historical origin) and very few borrowed words. So, whereas an ESL teacher may have the benefit of cognates to help students coming

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from a language background of Spanish or German, for instance, there is no such “leg up” for Chinese ELLs.

In order to best teach these students, we need a much broader knowledge and deeper understanding of Chinese and some of the key differences between Chinese and English. I will cover these differences under four headings: pronunciation, syntax, morphology, and body language. Although body language is in some sense more a matter of culture than of language, I feel it fits best in this section of my paper because it is such an integral part of face-to-face conversing, in a way that other cultural factors, to be addressed in the next section, are not.

Pronunciation

The pronunciation of Mandarin varies by region more widely than do other aspects of the language. However, there are a number of cross-regional constants even in pronunciation, some of which lead to predictable difficulties in English pronunciation.

For instance, Mandarin syllable structure is such that the only consonant sounds that can end a syllable are /n/, /ŋ/, and /ɿ/. The result is that any word in English that ends with a consonant other than these is difficult for native Chinese speakers to pronounce. I have noticed this struggle in a friend of mine who is a Chinese ELL: he commonly pronounces words like *took* as [tɔk^hə] instead of [tɔk], inserting a vowel in order to shift the final consonant to the beginning of a new syllable. The other strategy Chinese ELLs sometimes use when faced with such difficult-to-pronounce English words is to drop the final consonant(s) of a word altogether. Understanding this information about Chinese syllable structure gives us an explanation for why syllables ending in almost any consonant are difficult for Chinese ELLs to pronounce.

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Another important difference between English and Mandarin is that English is a stress-timed language whereas Mandarin is not. This means that in English, a stressed syllable receives a full “beat” in time and its vowel is given full pronunciation, whereas an unstressed syllable is passed over quickly and its vowel is (usually) reduced to a [ə]. Thus the stressed syllables time the utterance – they are the ones that receive a full beat while the other syllables are essentially crammed in between stresses. In Chinese, however, very few vowels are reduced. Most words display full vowels in every syllable, and each syllable gets approximately the same amount of time (depending on its tone). According to Danling Fu (2003), “the syllabic stress and weakened sounds in a word” are “the biggest challenge for Chinese students in learning English pronunciation” (p. 139). Further, “a majority of the newcomers have difficulty with syllable stress when pronouncing multisyllabic words” (p. 145).

Finally, talk about tones leads us to another important difference between the languages. In English, tones belong to thought groups. Each thought group (a group of words that hold together to express a meaning) has its own tonal pattern. Which words are grouped into intonation phrases and which intonation pattern each carries do not change the meaning of the words but do change the implications of the sentence. Consider the question, “Do you want a hamburger or a hot dog?” If I ask this with a single intonation pattern over the whole question and the intonation goes up at the end, it tells the listener I am asking it as a yes/no question, and if he doesn’t want either, he can say, “No, thanks.” If I break it into two intonation phrases, one for “Do you want a hamburger,” and one for “or a hot dog”, ending the second with a low tone, the listener knows I am assuming already that he wants one or the other and if he doesn’t want either, he’ll have correct my assumption and say, “Actually, neither.” In Chinese, however, each word has its own tonal pattern. In other words, tones are phonemic in Chinese, whereas they are

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suprasegmental in English. It is therefore a challenge for Chinese ELLs to extend an intonation melody over a whole thought group, or to use intonation to express other types of meaning (marking an statement as finished or unfinished, emphasizing a particular word, indicating whether a response is needed, etc.). They are used to using other devices (such as syntax) to accomplish these types of meaning. Also, Fu points out that learning to read words in groups instead of reading word by word is a likely difficulty (p.144).

Along with the general phonetic differences between Chinese and English, there are two common pronunciation errors that evidently arise from regional Chinese accents or dialects. First, some Chinese ELLs have difficulty making the distinction between /n/ and /l/ consistently. For instance, a Chinese language teacher of mine who was from Sichuan Province often confused my classmates and me in her pronunciation of both English and Chinese words with /n/ and /l/. The explanation I have found for this phenomenon is that in certain parts of China, including Sichuan Province, the *l* in pinyin transcript is pronounced as /n/ (Ho, 2003, p. 147). Ho adds, however, that “not all Chinese words transcribed with /n/ [*sic*] are pronounced with the /l/ sound and vice versa” (pp. 147-148). This explains the inconsistency we noticed and which you may notice with your Chinese ELLs from Sichuan.

Second, some Chinese ELLs have difficulty distinguishing between and pronouncing /l/ and /ɿ/. Since Standard Mandarin Chinese has both an /l/ phoneme and an /ɿ/ phoneme (the second of which is comfortably substituted for English /ɿ/), we find this is not generally a trouble area for those who grew up speaking standard Mandarin. For others, however, this difficulty distinguishing between /l/ and /ɿ/ is likely tied to the regional pronunciation or dialect in which they were raised, which we can reasonably assume did not have these two sounds as distinct phonemes.

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There are, of course, other differences between Chinese and English pronunciation, but those mentioned here are among the most likely to cause major pronunciation errors for Chinese ELLs.

Syntax

Perhaps the most encouraging similarity between English and Chinese for learners going between these languages is their basic word order. Both languages use SVO word order as their basic sentence structure. This makes it easier for beginning learners as they form simple sentences. The following is an example of a simple SVO sentence in both languages:

王 老师 教 中文。

Wang laoshi jiao zhongwen.

Wang Professor teaches Chinese.

‘Professor Wang teaches Chinese.’

However, as soon as the sentences become a little more complex, syntactic differences arise.

One important difference is the position of modifiers. Danling Fu (2003) explains very helpfully:

The rule in English is that the core structure of a sentence (S + V + O) should stand closely together, and the other parts should go before or after the core sentence. But in Chinese, a modifier mostly goes before the word it modifies....

This Chinese-English sentence order breaks the basic rule in... English syntax, so it sounds awkward to English speakers (p. 134).

Indeed, if a sentence grows sufficiently complex, it can sound awkward even to the point of unintelligibility. Fu gives us a wonderful example, using the English sentence, “Yesterday my

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friend whom you met before read a book recommended by her teacher for two hours in the library before she went home for dinner” (pp. 134-135). The Chinese order is, “Before you meet that my friend [/] yesterday before she go home for dinner in the library for two hours read [/] recommended by she [her] teacher that book” (p. 135). I have inserted slashes wherever a noun or verb phrase ends, so that before each slash is the head word of the phrase, which all the other words in that phrase modify. Just looking at these head words, you can see that the overall sentence structure is still subject (*friend*) - verb (*read*) - object (*book*), as in English. The more modifiers are added, however, the more difficult it is to understand English words in Chinese order. Many syntactic errors in Chinese ELLs’ writing and speaking represent instances of using English words in Chinese word order. Learning to use English word order consistently represents a significant hurdle that Chinese beginning ELLs must overcome.

A second important difference is found in how pronouns are used. In Chinese, pronouns “are normally omitted if their referents are contextually clear” (Chan, 2004, p. 34). Thus, if one were to translate perfectly grammatical Chinese sentences into English without providing additional pronouns in the translation, one would often get something like Chan’s example: “*I have a rabbit. Is very cute. I love very much.” Obviously this is not grammatical in English. For those of us who have spent time speaking with Chinese ELLs, however, sentences like this sound very familiar. It is this difference between the languages that explains this common error of Chinese ELLs.

Danling Fu helpfully gives a list of other differences between English and Chinese sentence structure (pp. 135-136), which I do not have time to delve into here. Her entire list is reproduced in Appendix A.

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Morphology

Despite the fact that English and Chinese are both considered analytic languages, there are many differences between their systems of morphology. While English has lost much of its inflection compared with its early days, it is still not as uninflected as Chinese. Several issues in the realm of English morphology seem to trip up Chinese ELLs quite often.

The singular-plural distinction seems to be a particularly difficult aspect of English for Chinese ELLs. I have seen this problem crop up even in the English of a Chinese L1 speaker who has been immersed in English for many years and is quite a proficient English speaker. Nouns are formed the same way for singular or plural in Chinese,¹ which means that the distinction between singular and plural is not made except optionally, when the speaker chooses to provide a number to modify the noun (or a special function morpheme in the case of nouns that denote people). This explains why it is very common to hear the Chinese ELL in your local Chinese restaurant charge you “fifteen dollar.” They are not accustomed to making a singular-plural distinction in their own language, so remembering to make it in English conversation can be extremely difficult.

Another common error which appears frequently in the speech of beginning Chinese ELLs and even occasionally in that of very advanced Chinese ELLs is failing to choose a pronoun with the appropriate gender. For Chinese ELLs literate in Chinese characters, this should not be much of a problem when they are *writing* in English, because written Chinese does make a distinction between masculine, feminine, and neuter third person pronouns, both in the singular and in the plural. However, these different Chinese characters are all pronounced the same way in Mandarin. Thus, in spoken Chinese there is no distinction between masculine,

¹ Chinese pronouns, however, do make a distinction between singular and plural by the presence or absence of the morpheme *men*; also, it is possible but not necessary use this morpheme to pluralize nouns that refer to people, such as *teacher* or *student*.

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feminine, and neuter third person pronouns, while there *is* such a distinction in *singular* third person pronouns in spoken English (*he/him, she/her, it*). As a result we find Chinese ELLs recounting incidents about people and saying “he” did this and “she” did that when they mean the opposite. This can lead to real confusion in conversations with native English speakers, especially since third person pronouns are so frequent!

Another pronoun difference pertains to the subject/object case distinction, a distinction that English makes for first-person and masculine and feminine third-person pronouns, but Chinese never makes (*I, we, he, she, and they vs. me, us, him, her, and them*). In Chinese a pronoun has the same form whether it functions as subject or object. Fu found an example of a misuse of pronoun case in one of the writing samples of her students: “In the CLA class the Ms L give *we* are [our] Wednesday test back” (p. 136; italics mine). Knowing that Chinese does not distinguish between subject and object case pronouns makes it easier for us to be patient with mistakes like this from our Chinese ELLs.

There are also morphological differences between Chinese and English verbs. Chinese has no inflectional verb endings, as Fu points out. First of all, as she states clearly,

The Chinese language doesn’t have verb tenses. Rather than changing the verb tense, it uses adverbial words or phrases such as *yesterday, tomorrow, and at this moment* to indicate the time – past, future, or present (p. 132).

Anyone who has worked with Chinese ELLs, especially relative beginners, will have noticed that sometimes they do not put verbs in the correct tense. For instance, they say things like “Yesterday I eat breakfast,” since in Chinese the appearance of the word meaning “yesterday” is sufficient to make a sentence like this past tense. The difference between the languages explains why choosing the appropriate verb tense is such an issue for them. Further, in Chinese “verbs

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don't change with the subject, either," as noted by Fu. For example, "we eat," "you eat," and "he eats" would all be said the same way, with no change, as is carried out in English, for the third person singular pronoun. Altogether, any kind of English verb inflection, whether related to time or subject, is difficult for Chinese ELLs to acquire.

The analytic character of Chinese is a delightful characteristic of it for one like myself, learning Chinese after having spent four years in high school learning Latin, a highly inflected language. However, while it is easy to go from a language with more inflection to one with less, it is difficult to go the other way. The difference is like that between swimming downstream and swimming upstream; we must be patient with our Chinese ELLs as they "swim upstream" into English morphology.

Body Language

Body language can easily be overlooked by teachers using it. I learned this by experience from spending time talking with a friend from China. After many times talking together, she asked me, "Why do you do this?" and demonstrated air quotes with her fingers. She said I do it all the time and she had no idea why. I had no idea I was doing it all the time, because for me using air quotes is simply a part of how I express myself in face-to-face conversation. I had been sensitive about what words I chose when speaking with her, and I had kept my sentences simple and often repeated ideas using different words. However, since gestures are not a part of the spoken language, I had not stopped to think about whether she would understand mine. In the following paragraphs I will address a couple of gestures that differ between China and America and that have come up in my own experience.

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Besides air quotes, there were two other instances of American body language that this my Chinese friend did not understand. The first is the “talking hand,” in which one makes a “mouth” with one’s hand and then repeatedly touches the mouth bottom represented by the thumb to the mouth top formed by the other four fingers. This is done to suggest someone is talkative in general or to suggest they are talking a lot right now. I had to explain to my friend both the meaning behind this otherwise mysterious gesture and how one might use it in context.

The second gesture she did not understand is the “that person is crazy” signal, in which one points one’s index finger at one’s head and spins it in circles, optionally using the other hand to point at someone in particular. Americans sometimes even use this gesture (as well as the “talking hand” gesture) to replace spoken words. Thus, we might say, “I don’t know about her. She’s a little...” and conclude with the spinning finger pointing towards our head. In this case a Chinese ELL might be able to figure out from context what the gesture means. However, if it is used on its own, not as part of a spoken sentence, it may not be understandable at all.

A third difference I am aware of in Chinese and American body language is the way we beckon someone to come to us. The Chinese face the palm down and sweep all four fingers down toward the ground, from parallel with the ground to perpendicular to it. Americans face the palm up and use as few fingers as one but up to all four, sweeping them up. If you see your Chinese ELLs performing the former gesture in your classroom, you should be aware they are asking you to come help them, not swatting at a fly or flexing their fingers!

Part III: Cultural Differences

Some understanding of Chinese culture, and particularly those areas of it that contrast with American culture, is helpful in teaching and relating to Chinese ELLs. One major point to be made about Chinese culture is that it has been changing rapidly for the past century or so. Even since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, less than four decades ago, China has changed significantly. When considering the background culture of our Chinese ELLs, then, we must be careful that we are up-to-date on Chinese culture.

Rapid Change

While the Chinese empires, the last of which ended in 1911, do serve as a historical backdrop for contemporary China, they are not at all representative of the largely modernized culture in which they the Chinese today. Similarly, for those of us who have studied the heyday of communism in China, with Mao Zedong's many political campaigns and the oppression and injustices associated with that era, we must remember that our young students know of these things only through the stories of their parents or grandparents. Even our middle-aged students were only children during these days. If we have older students, we should remember that they lived through these worst of recent times in China but are now living in a country that has been improving throughout the latter part of their lives. One of my Chinese language professors at UNH, Yige Wang, whom I would estimate to be in his late forties, emphasized to me that there is a huge generation gap between people of his generation and those twenty years older, as well as between his generation and today's teenagers (personal communication, February 9, 2012). We can nonetheless make some generalizations about the home culture of today's Chinese ELLs.

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Relating to Other Individuals

First, let's consider some differences between China and America regarding how individuals relate to others. Chinese ELLs may be surprised when they realize that in the US, complete strangers may talk to each other conversationally. In China, this is very unusual (Wang, personal communication, February 09, 2012). Thus, it is a good idea to prepare our Chinese ELLs for chit chat with strangers about topics like sports and the weather. Chinese people tend to be more reserved than Americans on first acquaintance (Wang). Well-established friendships in China involve the friends' inviting each other over for meals and being willing to go out of their way to help each other (Wang). In America, on the other hand, inviting someone over for a meal is of less central importance to the friendship. Here, sharing personal information and asking for advice might be greater indications of the strength or intimacy of the friendship. Another important difference is that in China, young women and girls hold hands or link arms as they walk side by side. This gesture would likely make an American girl uncomfortable and is likely to be misunderstood. Our students should be made aware of such differences.

Showing Respect

There are two points of difference I would bring out with regard to how one shows respect for others. First, in America, it is considered respectful to make eye contact with a person who is talking to you. In China, just the opposite is true – sustained eye contact is considered confrontational and disrespectful (Wang, personal communication, February 09, 2012). (From my experience with younger ELLs, however, I think this is less true of them than of middle aged and older Chinese people. For instance, two college-aged Chinese ELLs I know share eye

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contact with me as freely or almost as freely as most American students.) Second, in China there are very specific and clear terms of respect to be used for various people; there is a more obvious social hierarchy, and part of one's duty in maintaining it is using these terms of address (Wang). "All Chinese teachers may be addressed as *laoshi*, which is not a rank but a form of address of considerable respect, even more so than *professor* in English" (Eckstein et. al., 2003, p. 108). Because this term is usually translated as teacher, it is common for Chinese ELLs to address their teacher as "Teacher Jones" or "Teacher Mike" or even just "Teacher" (Eckstein et. al., p. 108). Chinese students also may refer to teachers and each other simply by their last names (Eckstein et. al., p. 108). In general, "[t]he Chinese prefer formality in their forms of address, even on the job. Titles, such as those for plumber, engineer, postal worker, and so on, are simply appended to the person's family name" (Eckstein et. al., p. 108). It is a good idea to inform your Chinese ELLs that it is by and large considered impolite in America to refer to a personal acquaintance by last name only. Further, it is considered polite to call people what they ask to be called, rather than insisting on a more formal title against their wishes.

Conversational Taboos

In every society, some topics of conversation are considered taboo. According to Eckstein et. al., "Death, sex, homosexuality, religious beliefs, and prodemocracy ideas are among the most obvious examples of topics to be avoided in public" (2003, p. 108) in China. While I accept that this may have been true about public conversations in 2003, when Eckstein et. al.'s book was published, this may be changing. Yige Wang told me that religion is a comfortable topic of conversation among friends and that there are conversations about politics on public talk shows and much criticism of the bureaucracy on the internet (personal

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communication, February 09, 2012). Nonetheless, criticizing the bureaucracy is admittedly not quite the same thing as holding up prodemocracy ideas, so there is likely a spectrum here of what is considered acceptable to say. In general, we need to prepare our students for the eventuality that all these topics will be brought in America in casual conversation and in the public square. We may also want to be sensitive about bringing up these topics unnecessarily for discussion in class.

Gift-Giving

Another important area of difference between Chinese and American culture is gift giving. The Chinese give gifts more frequently than Americans do. For example, in circumstances where an American might write a thank-you note or email, someone from China would give a gift or a thank-you dinner to express appreciation (Wu & Yu, 2003, p. 387). “The most popular occasions for gift-giving are birthdays, visiting the sick, spring and midautumn, moon or harvest festivals, and New Year’s celebrations. Weddings, meals with previously unknown persons, and returns from long journeys also require gifts” (Eckstein et. al., 2003, p. 109). It is also expected that a gift will be repaid in the form of another gift of similar value (Wang, personal communication, February 09, 2012). Money is considered a perfectly acceptable gift, and does not have any connotations of a lack of thoughtfulness, as it can in Western culture (Wu & Yu, p. 351). Also, in Chinese culture, it is considered an insult to open a gift in front of the giver (Wang). All these facts about gift-giving should help explain some of the actions of our Chinese ELLs. Further, it helps us understand what advice or information about American gift-giving we need to share with them to prevent them from making unnecessary faux pas. I would suggest we tell our Chinese ELLs that gifts of money are usually not acceptable

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here and that it is polite when receiving a gift in America to ask the giver whether he would like you to open it right away.

Dietary Preferences

Another point of difference that is important to consider is dietary preferences. Students from southern China, and particularly Sichuan Province, prefer spicy food. Yige Wang told me of several instances of American food that can be surprising or difficult for Chinese students to get used to. One is lettuce-based salad, with its uncooked vegetables. Vegetables are never served this way in China. Another is meat that is served in large pieces and cooked leaving pink inside. In China, meat is always cooked to well done and is usually sliced or chopped into small pieces before serving. Finally, there are desserts. Wang suggested that to a Chinese person coming to America, American desserts are far too sweet, “to the point of tasting bitter.” I think this may be less true of the younger generation of Chinese ELLs, given my personal experience with a Chinese ELL friend of mine who loves ice cream. However, if we invite a Chinese student over for dinner, then we would be wise and considerate to serve something besides a Caesar salad with a large juicy steak!

Religion

Finally, let me give a quick sketch of religion in China, taken in part from my interview with Yige Wang (February 09, 2012). China is largely atheist. Also, Buddhism, in many cases only a very mild form, is quite common. There are a handful of Christians in China, as well, tolerated if they are in a government-sanctioned church and follow certain regulations. Falun Gong is considered a cult in China, and is illegal. One Chinese friend of mine assured me that

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China now has religious freedom, while in the same conversation telling me that Falun Gong is illegal. It seems he did not consider this a problem since he had “no sympathy” for practitioners of that religion. It is interesting to see that a Chinese person, even one who has spent years living in America, would consider China to have religious freedom despite the fact that one religion is banned entirely! Clearly our Chinese ELLs may come from a standpoint in regard to religion that is less common in America.

With Chinese culture changing so rapidly, everything I have brought out here will need to be continually tested to see whether it is still true of Chinese culture. Nonetheless, for now these things are useful to help us interact with Chinese ELLs with understanding and sensitivity.

Part IV: Differences in Classroom Culture

Like the broader Chinese culture, though probably at a slower rate, Chinese education is changing. In the words of my former Chinese language teacher, “China [has] learned more and more from [A]merican education[,] and education innovation is in process [in China]” (Yunchun Liu, personal communication, March 4, 2012).

That said, China’s education is still greatly influenced by Confucius, just as Western education is influenced by Socrates. Huang (2005) very concisely summarizes the ideas of these two thinkers that influence the American and Chinese systems of education:

Socrates (469-399BC), a Western exemplar, valued the questioning of both his own and others’ beliefs, the evaluation of others’ knowledge, self-generated knowledge, and teaching by implanting doubt. Confucius (551-479BC), an Eastern exemplar, valued effortful learning, respectful learning, and pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge (referencing Tweed and Lehman, 2002).

Of course, this simple dichotomy paints with a broad brush and should not be taken to account for all the details of either system.

In the rest of this section, I will consider first how the teacher is viewed and how the teacher and students relate to each other. I will then consider the teacher’s role in the classroom. Next, I will consider the student’s role in education. Then I will wrap up my consideration of the subject with two practical pieces of information that I think teachers of Chinese ELLs will find helpful.

The Teacher’s Image and the Student/Teacher Relationship

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In China, the teacher is viewed as the students' "authority of knowledge" (phrase from Huang, 2005). The teacher is not viewed as a mere "facilitator" of the students' education, as is common in America. "Teachers are expected to be strict, well-prepared for class, knowledgeable, and stimulating, and are accountable for students' success" (Eckstein et al., 2003, p.104). These qualities are also expected in America, but not to the same degree as in China. Reinforcing the teacher's image as the knowledge authority is the "widely shared belief that young people are far too inexperienced to generate responses that would be sound, interesting, or worthy of attention" (Eckstein et al., p.104). As Yunchun Liu put it, "In class [C]hinese students follow and respect their teacher without preconditions [*sic*]" (personal communication, March 4, 2012). I think by this she means "unconditionally" or perhaps "without hesitation." This goes along with the Confucian idea of "respectful learning," which contrasts with the Socratic idea of questioning one's own and others' beliefs and apparent knowledge.

Out of this idea of the teacher as the authority of knowledge comes a great respect for teachers. This respect is shown in many ways. For instance, as was mentioned in the previous section, teachers are called by the highly respectful title, *laoshi*, which literally means "old master," where *old* is a respectful term indicating experience and *master* is in the sense of having mastered an art or skill. Further, students "show respect and affection for their teachers by erasing the blackboard after class; helping the teacher move, sort, or distribute materials; and staying after school to assist with a variety of tasks" (Eckstein et al., 2003, p. 106). Inviting teachers over for tea or dinner (Liu, personal communications, March 4, 2012) and giving gifts to teachers are also common practices among Chinese students.

As for teacher-student relationships, according to Eckstein et al., in China "[s]ome teachers develop close – almost parental – relationships with students and become very involved

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in the more personal and private aspects of the students' lives" (2003, p.106). They note, however, that "the formality of the teacher-student relationship is unlikely to diminish as a result of this closeness" (p. 106). Liu confirmed the existence of personal relationships between teachers and students outside of class, but emphasized the teacher's part in it, saying that "[m]ore and more [Chinese] teachers make friends with their students if they have spare time outside of class" (personal communications, March 4, 2012). In this context, she mentioned that students frequently invite teachers to tea and dinner, especially those considered most knowledgeable and possessing an unassuming air. She called this "the best chance" students have "to communicate with their teachers."

This relates to how teachers communicate with their students, as well. Eckstein et al. commented that "Written comments on papers and tests are not considered private in China. Thus, students may share the teacher's remarks with other students. Comments and communications meant to be considered private are delivered verbally" (2003, p.105). Liu noted that phone calls and emails to students are regarded as the "more private way" to address students about their progress and regress (personal communication, March 4, 2012). This reflects the closeness of the relationship compared with the teacher-student relationship in America. The idea of getting a phone call from one's teacher strikes American students as strange or even creepy, depending on the exact context. Clearly, this relationship is different in China.

Finally there is no reason to be sensitive about physical contact with Chinese children in the classroom, such as touching their heads or shoulders. Chinese teachers often show affection to their students this way. According to Liu, "tapping students['] shoulder or head very tenderly is very common for aged teacher[s]" (personal communication, March 4, 2012). While children

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from some other cultures might be offended by this, we can gather from Liu's comments that young Chinese students generally will not be.

Teacher-Centered Learning

The method of learning primarily used in China is teacher-fronted and formal. Eckstein et al. attributed this in part to the large class size common in Chinese schools, "with perhaps 60 or more students to a class" (2003, p.102). However, I think the primary reason for teacher-centered education is found in the values of Confucianism which have for so long influenced Chinese education. The teacher holds "essential knowledge" and the student is to practice "respectful learning" (Huang, 2005, referencing Tweed & Lehman, 2002) – with respect in Chinese schools demonstrated through careful listening, attention, and note-taking. "In general, most teachers do not expect a great deal of participation and discussion, if any, from their students" (Eckstein et al., p.104). Stated another way, "Chinese teachers are usually explainers, and Chinese students act as listeners and note takers" (Huang, 2005). Thus, Chinese teachers depend heavily on lecture as a teaching method.

In contrast, Huang noted that:

American teachers usually regard themselves as students' facilitators of learning but not their authorities of knowledge. They can admit their ignorance on a topic. Generally they do not easily get angry by *[sic]* students' challenging questions as Chinese teachers do. They give students' *[sic]* freedom in expressing their different ideas. They do not directly give answers to a particular question. What they stress is students' thinking and discussion (2005).

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While there is something to what Huang said here, I think this overstates the case slightly. As Huang noted in the same paper, arts students reported more student participation in their classes than science students did in theirs.

Even those American teachers who make frequent use of lectures may not be easy for Chinese ELLs to learn from. Huang's 2005 study of Chinese students in American colleges showed various non-linguistic reasons why American lectures can be difficult for Chinese students to understand and follow. According to Huang (2005), American professors (1) are less likely to organize their lecture in a way that makes sense to the Chinese ELLs; (2) adhere less to the textbook(s) during lectures, often allowing themselves to get sidetracked on "rabbit trails"; (3) do not make as much use as Chinese teachers do of writing outlines and key points on the blackboard; (4) do not usually summarize main ideas at the end of the lecture, as Chinese teachers usually do; (5) usually require much student participation; and (6) usually require much group work or class discussion. In Appendix B I have copied twelve practical suggestions to American teachers from Chinese students who participated in Huang's study.

The Student's Role

From what has already been said, it is clear that a large part of the students' role in China is to pay attention and take thorough notes. However, this is not the whole story. Students also must approach education actively. Confucius' principle of "effortful learning" means that although in some sense teachers take responsibility for students' learning, students also are made to feel their own responsibility in the matter. It is a prevalent idea in China that how well one does in school is directly and primarily related to how hard one tries, the effort put in. As University of Michigan psychology professor Harold Stevenson puts it,

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[The willingness of Asian children to work hard] stems from Confucian beliefs about the role of effort and ability in achievement. The malleability of human behavior has long been emphasized in Chinese writings.... Individual differences in potential are deemphasized, and great importance is placed on the role of effort and diligence in modifying the course of human development (1992, p. 73).

In addition, although there is less class participation in Chinese classes than in America, this does not mean students never ask questions or discuss what they are learning. Liu suggested that Chinese students will often “discuss questions after class is over” or ask the teacher questions during a break, rather than raising a hand in class (personal communication, March 4, 2012). Also, teachers do ask questions during class and look for students to answer. Liu informed me that Chinese teachers try to give students all the same chance to answer questions by allowing anyone to raise a hand to answer and then calling on particular students to answer if no one raises a hand. She said that if teachers “are not too exacting,” students answer questions “more actively”. Thus, although Chinese students are “less likely” than American students to volunteer answers to questions (Liu), the personality and expectations of the teacher can influence them to be more or less forward. Students in China also sometimes give presentations (Liu) as well as performing, perhaps by singing or reciting poetry (Eckstein et al., 2003, p. 104).

It is a commonly held belief that the entire school experience of Chinese students consists of memorizing and spitting back out. While education in China does require a good deal of memorization, that is not the only aspect of learning in China, and it is becoming a smaller part in our day. The first school years of Chinese children of course require a significant amount of memorization if they are to become literate, since Chinese has a logographic writing system – there is no way around it, the children simply must memorize the characters. Perhaps this is part

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of what has given Chinese education its reputation for being all memorization. When I asked Liu whether memorization is still a major component of learning in China, she replied that “[m]ore and [m]ore course[s] [are] adopt[ing] open-book examination[s] and creative writing.” This represents a change in Chinese education which is leaning more toward American practices.

Closing Points

There are two further practical points that should be considered by American teachers of Chinese ELLs. One is that the parents of Chinese students, even up through the college years of the students, are likely to keep a close check on their children’s progress in school and to pressure them to study hard. Yige Wang pointed out to me that while American parents spend a great deal of time and money on their children’s extracurricular activities, Chinese parents spend incredible amounts of time and money on their children’s education, ensuring that they get the best education the parents can provide for them (personal communication, February 2, 2012). Even for college students, it is typical for the parents to pay their full tuition, with the idea that the full-time job of the student will be studying. Chinese parents are very adamant about their children’s education and may be more likely than other parents to become involved in it, such as by consulting with the teacher.

The final point I want to touch on concerns spotlighting. Eckstein et al. pointed out that most Chinese students “will turn away from and possibly resent being singled out for praise” (2003, p.104). I think this may stem from the outward humility that is integral to Chinese culture, such that a person not only refrains from praising himself in public, but also avoids praising someone else while that person is present. Thus, while American teachers often spotlight and

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praise good behavior or academic performance in the classroom, this may be embarrassing to Chinese ELLs, thus making it more of a punishment than a reward in their case.

In sum, we need to be careful about asking too much of our Chinese ELLs in terms of class participation before they are ready for it. We also need to be clear about the main points of our lectures or otherwise structured lessons. Writing main ideas on the blackboard is a good practice with all ELLs, but especially so for Chinese ELLs. We need to be available to students outside of class, particularly students who are shy or come from the Chinese classroom culture. Chinese students tend to be highly motivated students who value education and respect their teachers. However, we need to be sensitive to their learning needs and habits, helping them to adapt to the American system where necessary, and adapting our practices to meet their needs where we can.

Part V: Conclusion

In this paper, I have covered three main topics: 1. differences between the Chinese and English languages; 2. differences between Chinese and American culture; and 3. differences between Chinese and American educational practices, including norms in and outside of the classroom, for both teachers and students. In the first area of inquiry, we saw that while Chinese and English share an SVO basic word order, there are pervasive differences between the languages, some of which help explain L2 errors made by Chinese ELLs. In the second area, we saw a myriad of differences between Chinese and American culture, but also noted that Chinese culture is changing rapidly in the wake of the ending of the Cultural Revolution and is increasingly influenced by the West. In the third area, some of the key differences between Chinese and American educational practices included that Chinese education is more teacher-centered and that Chinese students and teachers are likely to maintain closer relationships outside of class. In education as well, however, China is under the influence of the West. Particularly in terms of the teacher-centered vs. student-centered debate and the memorization/testing vs. discussion/writing debates, China's classroom culture is slowly becoming more like America's.

Teaching ELLs in America will always require flexibility and awareness on the part of the teacher. However, for me, the meeting of cultures and the multiple puzzles and challenges along the way are part of the appeal of teaching ESL. For my own teaching of Chinese ELLs, I hope that the research represented in this paper will help minimize the negative aspects of these things – the culture *clash* and the puzzles and challenges that have a *negative* effect on Chinese ELLs. Through this research I have increased my knowledge of Chinese language and culture, and I hope this will make me a more understanding and capable ESL teacher for this group of

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students, sensitive to their particular needs. Since some teachers, both mainstream and ESL, have just one or two Chinese ELLs in their class and many ELLs of other backgrounds, they cannot devote as much time to this topic as I have. For such teachers, I hope this paper will prove a time-saving resource in coming to understand more about their Chinese students.

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Appendix A

The following is a list of “[o]ther difference in sentence structure between the Chinese and English languages” reproduced here from Danling Fu’s book, *An Island of English:*

Teaching English in Chinatown (2003), pages 135-136:

- A Chinese sentence can omit a linking verb, like the verb *to be* in English. For instance, in Chinese we can say: “My father not at home, he at school.”
- Sometimes a Chinese sentence uses double verbs together, such as “I is work hard.” The verb *is*, which functions more like *do* in English, here stresses *work*.
- A Chinese sentence can omit a subject, such as “Tomorrow have no homework.”
- The subject can be omitted in a subordinate clause in Chinese. For instance, to express the English meaning “I think I will go to the store to play video games after school,” the Chinese would say, “I think today after school go game store play video game.”
- The *it* that indicates time, weather, and temperature in English, such as “It is Friday,” “It is cloudy,” and “It is hot,” doesn’t exist in the Chinese language. We have to say “Today Friday,” “Today cloudy,” and “Today hot.” We often see expressions in Chinese ESL students’ writing like “It today Friday,” as they don’t know what *it* stands for in this sentence.
- Chinese only has one word for the meanings of “to have” (to possess” and “there is/are” (to exist). For instance, we would use “to have” in the following two sentences: “I have many books” and “My apartment has many books.”
- A “because” clause is followed by a “so” plus a sentence in Chinese. For instance, “Because he is sick, so he can’t come to the meeting.”
- A “though” clause is followed by a “but” plus a sentence in Chinese, such as “Though he was very sick, but he came to the meeting.”
- The subclause with *if*, *when*, *because*, *after*, or *before* has to go before the main sentence; for example, “When she came, we had finished our work.” It is not in the right order in Chinese if the sentence reads: “We had finished our work when (or after) she came.”

Appendix B

The following is a list of some of the “practical suggestions for their American professors” made by Chinese university students, taken from J. Huang’s 2005 study, “Challenges of Academic Listening in English: Reports by Chinese Students,” published in the *College Student Journal*, volume 39, issue 3, pages 553-569. The first, third, fifth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh suggestions seem to be particularly salient.

1. American teachers should write key words, phrases, and ideas on the chalkboard in class.
2. The teacher should closely follow the textbook. If the teacher is teaching something not related to the textbook, he/she should provide students with related materials in advance.
3. The teacher can either put main points of a lecture on the web site or give us a copy of the main points so that we don’t have to spend much time taking notes in class.
4. The teacher should often encourage international students to actively participate in class lectures.
5. The teacher should be aware of international students’ difficulties in learning and give them individual help.
6. The teacher should give students study guides, distribute and announce reading assignments ahead of time so that students can have sufficient time to familiarize themselves with the materials before class [*sic*].
7. More lecture, less discussion.
8. The teacher should vary the pace of the lesson and break up content into accessible units.
9. The teacher can teach international students appropriate learning strategies.
10. The teacher should use true and easy examples to help students understand a lecture.
11. The teacher should regularly get feedback from international students.
12. The teacher can slow down a little bit when teaching to make it easier for ESL students.