

# **Cultural Conflicts in an Intercultural Classroom**

## **Discourse and Interpretations from a Cultural Perspective**

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[Extract]

### **Differences in Classroom Behaviours**

Teachers and students develop their own norms and practice in their behaviours in the classroom. When teachers and students from different cultures come into one classroom, they might find so many differences from what they have been used to in their ways of speaking, their gestures, facial expressions, terms used to address each other and ways of participating in the class activities. In the following section, three different behaviours of students and teachers from China and New Zealand are described and discussed. One is the means of address between teachers and students, second is the in-class behaviour of students, and finally the relationship between teachers and students.

### **Addressing between Teachers and Students**

In a Chinese classroom, students always address their teacher very formally with a title of “teacher” plus his surname, such as “Teacher Zhang”. This is the case for students of all ages, from children in kindergarten to doctoral students in universities. No matter where and when, students should always address the people who had ever taught them with “teacher” formally, even outside school and after their graduation. Chinese teachers also address their students in a very formal way, by their full names, never by their given names.

In New Zealand, students address their teachers in a less formal and more various ways. Mr., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Professor are sometimes used as titles, plus the surname. But more often students just address their teacher by their given names. Teachers can also address their students by their given names.

### **In-class Behaviours**

In a Chinese classroom, the atmosphere is more serious and solemn than that in New Zealand. In all primary schools and high schools, at the beginning of each class, when the teacher comes into the classroom and declares the start of the class, students are instructed by the class monitor to stand up and show respect to the teacher by saying “Good morning, or good afternoon, teacher.” At the end of the class, when the teacher announces the end of the class, the whole class stand up to express thanks and respect again by saying “Goodbye, teacher.” Chinese teachers and students are very much used to the way of addressing each other formally. Teachers always look serious and seldom carry a smile on the face.

During the class, students are not allowed to interrupt their teacher for whatever reason. If they have questions, they are told to put up their hands first and ask the question only with the teacher’s permission. So most Chinese students are used to the way of listening to the teacher in class and seldom ask questions in class. If they do want to ask some questions, they would rather wait till after class. However, in a Western classroom, it is quite normal for students to interrupt the teacher to ask a question or to indicate his or her own ideas during the teacher’s speech, sometimes even arguing with the teacher.

### **Relationship between Teachers and Students**

In China, the relationship between teachers and students is more hierarchical, formal and distant. In addition, teachers assume more responsibility, obligation and authority towards students. Teachers have the responsibility of requiring, persuading and forcing their students to work hard for a better result of their study. If a teacher does not show that attitude, showing less concern to students’ marks, this teacher would be regarded as a less responsible teacher, even though he is preferred by those students who do not like working hard. Thus teachers are naturally endowed with the obligation to help those students who do not like to work hard to improve their studies. In most schools, one of the criteria in evaluating teachers is how many students the teacher has helped to make improvements not only in their study, but also in their morality. Therefore, once the students start their schooling, they are under the custody of the teachers who take responsibility for their study, their ways of living, their views of the world, their values and so on. To most students, teachers, particularly the primary school teachers and high school teachers, have higher authority than their parents. That is

why it is often seen that when the parents cannot persuade the child to do something, they will go to the teacher for help, because the child will listen to the teacher rather than to the parents.

The following quotation was given by one university teacher who was in charge of one class. This would indicate how a Chinese teacher works with the students.

“Every morning, I went to the classroom to call the roll. When I found someone was always escaping from the class, I had to talk to him (do the mental education work), telling the student to behave well, explaining the importance of studying well. Once I went into the boys’ dorm to grasp one boy out of his bed because he was still sleeping while others were having classes.” (Bai, 2003)

In turn, Chinese students would regard this kind of teacher to be a good teacher, responsible:

“Miss Bai was a very responsible teacher, she was strict with us, we were grateful for her concern.” (one student from Bai’s class, 2003).

From the experience of being a teacher in New Zealand and knowledge I learned from other teachers, I would say that teachers in New Zealand have less responsibility, obligation and authority than those in China. When Mary (a teacher from Auckland University of Technology) went to China to meet the group of students and their parents, many parents gave Mary their phone numbers and e-mail addresses, asking her to tell them how their children behaved at AUT in New Zealand. They were very surprised when Mary gave the parents the following answers because parents in China are used to getting every information about their children from the teacher:

“I cannot tell you about your children’s behaviour, nor can I tell you about your children’s exam results. Your children are adults now, they have their privacy and rights to tell you or not to do so.” (Mary, 2002) “I know that Chris might be smoking, but I don’t want to tell his parents. I don’t have the right. Chris is 22 years old. He has the right to decide whether to tell his parents or not.” (Mary, 2004)

During the first year of teaching, I often complained to my colleagues in the Chinese section that some students in my class were not working hard enough,

coming late and leaving early, or not attending the class regularly. I wondered if I should say something or do something to those students. The response I got from them was NO. They told me that students had their freedom of choosing their way of learning. The students were responsible for their own study, not the teacher. This was confirmed by another experience when my daughter started her study at Epsom Girls Grammar. When my daughter and I met the dean on the first day of school, the dean told my daughter, that all her teachers would hope that she would work hard, but they would not force her to study hard. Both the teachers and parents had no right to force her to study hard. In contrast, the relationship between teachers and students in New Zealand is less distant and more like friends. Students would not have the distant or fearful feeling towards their teachers. On the other hand, students are more relaxed with their teachers, which creates a more relaxed environment for teaching and learning.

“I was so surprised that my teacher apologized to one of my classmates today in class, because the teacher asked that student, after an exam why she did not do as well as other students, and this made the student cry and run out of the classroom. If this happened in China, I am sure the teacher would say to the student, “how couldn’t you do as well as others? Where is your head? What’s it for?” (Dianna, 2004)