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In Their Own Words: Chinese Students in American Universities

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TESOL 2014 International Convention, Portland, OR
“In Their Own Words: Chinese Students in American Universities”

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Purposes

- To explore Chinese students’ perceptions of their ESL experiences in the Intensive English Language Institute at Utah State University as compared with their prior learning EFL experiences in China
- To get a glimpse of Chinese students’ perceived quality of life at a major state university in the Intermountain West

Method

Interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded. Recordings were transcribed, and translated to English.

Participants

- 12 Chinese students who were either current IELI students or recent graduates of IELI taking courses in their majors
- 6 participants had participated in the IELI in China program before coming to the Utah State University campus to finish
- 6 participants had received other “more traditional” preparation in China

Themes: Selected Quotes

Learning Environment

- Compared to the strenuous middle school years, the university years are a time to relax... The atmosphere in China is not conducive to learning, and few students take a fancy for learning English. In IELI (in China) classes, only the students in the first two rows apply themselves to learning English, but even they speak Chinese most of the time. The students here have to speak English and express themselves clearly to the students nearby.
- Here, study is closely related to life. You need to communicate with others in order to accomplish everything. ... In China, after you finish the homework, you may not necessarily remember how to use it. Here (at USU) after the completion of an assignment, you will still meet with it in daily life. So I will learn more quickly here.
- In China, after you used English for the first time, you would think it unlikely that you’d meet the person you just addressed for a second time. In that case, you wouldn’t care if you improved your English or not. In the United States, the first time you felt unable to communicate properly, you might make preparations in order to be prepared to speak more the next time.

Goals of teaching & learning

- In China I had IELI courses for one year. The goal was to prepare for my study here in the US.
- The main goal of the courses is to improve your English, so that you can be better adapted in the United States.
- Everyone has different expectations. If you want to learn well, certainly the main goal is to improve English level.
- I took three courses in IELI, including listening and writing. My major purpose was to pass the exam. Few of us wanted to go abroad. Therefore our major purpose was to pass the exam.
- I hadn’t really thought about it before I came here. I just thought that as long as I could pass the English exam—that was good enough.
- In China, ...the main aim is just to train a university graduate. In the US, great attention is focused on the cultivation of professional interest. Many Chinese students feel very confused upon graduation. They don't know what they truly like. But the university education in the United States will tell you, or help you understand, what you like in the process of four years’ study.

The demeanor of teachers

- Discipline is sometimes lax and the teachers don't take things seriously in China. In contrast, the teachers are very strict with the students in the U.S.
- It is quite similar. Although the way of teaching in the United States is more relaxed.
- The American teachers are very animated whereas Taiwanese teachers are a little bit reserved.
- I have had many different teachers, and they are all quite different.

Teaching practices

- I think Chinese teachers will lead the students down the road. However, American teachers just give you a starting point, letting you decide what to do next.
- American teachers focus more on skills. Chinese teachers focus a lot on exams. After each exam, they will spend much time on explaining the answers.
- There are a lot of novel teaching approaches here. There are fewer fixed patterns. Teachers try to arouse the students' interest.
- Chinese teachers usually spend more time on giving lectures, and telling you what to do. American teachers try to let you explore and understand for yourself. They pay attention to the cultivation of ability. Unlike Chinese teachers, they do not give you detailed instruction. American teachers would rather give you just a general idea, or a few details. However, Chinese teachers would sometimes cram you full of everything they know.
- Here in the U.S., students are encouraged to discover everything for themselves. For every assignment, you have to think about how you will complete it, though the teacher also checks and evaluates it. ... Chinese teachers use fixed textbooks... teaching and learning both follow the same fixed pattern, which is mechanical and rigid. And there is always a fixed answer to the question.
- In China, teachers may ask students to remember many new words, but U.S., teachers give you just a limited number of words to remember. In China, teachers give you an article and want you to memorize the words in the article. Usually, they don't give you anything else to do with the article.

Campus & Social Life

- The on-campus life is richer and more colorful here than in China. But the study life here is more stressful. In addition to IELI classes, I still have more classes relating to what I specialize in... Outside the classroom, I have more social contact with Chinese students. As long as I am not with foreigners, I generally speak Chinese.
- Learning and campus life is good. But there are relatively few entertainment places.
- At first, I took the initiative to make friends. Later on, I came to see that when they went to parties, they never invited me to go along with them. Asked why, they say that Chinese people like being quiet. I find it very difficult to be bosom friends with them. We can only be ritual friends.
- My roommates are (Chinese) business majors, so most of the time I speak Chinese. I don't speak English outside of class very often. I do not have a strong desire to communicate with foreigners. I feel there are rarely opportunities... Sometimes we may want to communicate with them, but find it difficult to integrate into the group. For example, when some of them are talking in the living room, I feel hesitant to join in. I feel when many people are talking together, if I join in, I'll feel very embarrassed. I may have a psychological barrier. Plus, I feel it is difficult to understand what they are talking about.
- The foreigners generally don't eat animal organs, pig's trotters, chicken feet, and so on. They don't eat spicy food very often. They have a light taste. They don't work on Saturdays and Sundays. For example, hospitals, banks, and some other departments are closed at that time, so it is very inconvenient. The doctor's fee for visiting a patient at home is very high. There is stricter tobacco control. Sometimes neighbors may report you if they find you drinking wine. ... I am satisfied with the campus life and learning life here. There are good resources, as long as you study hard, the environment is surely better than that at home.
- I am a person who loves all cultures. Utah is a very special place. Here Mormonism is widely practiced. As a result, the campus life is more simple and unadorned than other American universities. I've also been to such famous universities as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford. The campus life there is crazier, and everyone is putting in a lot of effort. The campus life here is a bit dull.