

Building Bridges and Crossing Borders: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Impact of ESL Learners' Beliefs, Expectations, and Experiences in their Sense of Progress

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The number of students who speak or write English as a Second Language (ESL) is steadily increasing in all colleges and schools in North America. In addition to possessing diverse language backgrounds, second language learners bring with them diversity of cultures, past experiences with different educational backgrounds, and perspectives concerning social and economic power structures (Clair & Adger 1999; Storti 1999). A typical North American classroom in present days is comprised of individuals from all areas of the globe with a myriad of cultural norms and social mores. This tremendous diversity and lack of cultural commonality can lead to feelings of alienation, anxiety and tension. Thus, for many of these learners, the American classroom can be a mysterious place where challenges abound (Matczynski, Rogus, and Lasley 2000). This paper specifically looks at how these cross-cultural differences may facilitate or hinder ESL learners' sense of progress.

ESL learners are usually motivated language learners and among the most successful students in the classroom. They come to North America to pursue their studies and exert a lot of effort to assure their success in the academic life. They perceive language classes as the "doorway to their future studies and their careers" (Ballard, 1996, p.148). However, they find that studying English in North America is quite different from what they have experienced and accustomed to in their home countries. These differences in terms of expectations and forms of behavior make their academic success much more elusive and hard to achieve (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

In spite of the great effort from both ESL teachers and students to make the crucial step in the adjustment process and the fact that these learners work really hard in order to maintain the academic standards, problems of poor academic performance still exist. In ESL classrooms, the poor performance is often attributed to learners' lack of English competence. However, attributing the poor performance to poor English is not adequately true. "Masked by language problems lie the much deeper problems of

adjusting to new intellectual culture, a new way of thinking and of processing knowledge to meet the expectations inherent in the Anglo educational system. Foreign students do not come merely from other language background, but, more importantly, from other cultural background” (Ballard, 1996, p.150).

ESL Learners’ Experience, Beliefs and Expectations

ESL learners bring to language learning task a complex set of attitudes, experiences, expectations and learning strategies (Oxford, 1993). Their success and progress of language learning depends largely on how well or ill matched is their style with the socio-cultural factors that include, among other things, teachers’ and learners’ beliefs, expectations, experiences and learning style preferences.

Learners’ Experience

The experience of previous language learning predisposes learners to certain expectations about language learning. ESL learners possess some knowledge about language and language learning, which influences their learning behavior. This knowledge also sets to a considerable extent the whole nature of a teaching-learning process and teachers’ and learners’ participation in it. Tarone & Yule (1989) say that previous language learning experience influences learners’ approach to learning. ESL learners’ experience of language learning, therefore, has to be taken into active consideration to examine how it may impact their progress in language learning. ESL learners’ experience contributes to the development of their beliefs regarding language learning.

Learners’ Beliefs

Learners’ belief is another important socio-cultural factor in language learning. ESL learners often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning (Horwitz, 1987). Existing research like Cortazzi (1990) who studied cultural-related differences in beliefs suggests that learners’ beliefs have the potential to influence both their experiences and their actions as language learners. Thus, students’ behaviors and actions in the classroom are strongly predetermined by their beliefs and perceptions.

Horwitz (1987, 1988) holds that beliefs about language learning lead to deployment of strategies. He feels that nearly all behaviors are governed by beliefs and experiences. He stresses that learners’ beliefs may either contribute to, or impede the engagement of learners in the process of language learning, and accordingly the learning outcome. In a similar line of thought, Coterrall (1995) argues that learners’ beliefs regarding the different aspects of classroom culture determine their readiness for, and acceptance or

rejection of the ideas and practices of recent English language teaching/learning theories.

In any ESL classroom, it is not uncommon to find teachers and students who had experienced different models of education develop different beliefs about the different aspects of classroom culture. But when students experienced one model, and having one set of beliefs and expectations are exposed to other models of education, there is usually a mismatch, and consequently a negative environment for learning results from it. Haughton & Dickinson (1988) and Kumaravadivelu (1990) presented illustration of mismatch in the classroom due to differing perceptions of the roles of teachers and learners.

Similarly, there are differences in learners' beliefs regarding interaction, classroom atmosphere and other aspects of culture in different cultural contexts. Therefore, it seems clear that we need to address these differences in learners' beliefs and how beliefs mismatch can lead to different expectations between teachers and learners which will eventually impact learners' sense of progress.

Learners and teachers' Expectations

Expectations of teachers and learners are other socio-cultural phenomena that significantly influence learners' development and their sense of progress. Both teachers and learners have expectations about the content and method of English as second language. When content, materials and teaching methods conform to the expectations of the learners, they may feel motivated, they may enjoy their learning, and the learning achievement may also be high. In other words, when teachers and students' expectations are congruent or, at least, close, language learning would be easier and the learners may experience better progress. If the teachers and students' expectations are diverse, they may constitute barriers to teaching and learning.

Culture is believed to serve as a framework for the perception of others and guides the interpretation of classroom interaction. It is necessary to examine the cross-cultural differences that occur in the process of teaching and learning in order to analyze not only how teachers and learners make sense of the classroom behavior and interaction, but also how these different expectations influence the way learners view their own success and progress in language learning.

Since cultures differ enormously with respect to socialization, wide variations in ESL learners' beliefs, expectations, attitude to language, behavior, language learning and use are quite usual. When these students find classroom practices that contradict with their expectations of classroom culture, they may find it difficult to adjust to the new procedures and

methods, and they may withdraw from the learning process and ultimately feel uncomfortable with the progress they are making.

Although the notion of “sense of progress” is not a widely used term in literature, there are a number of studies that have dealt with how students feel about their own development. Learners may attribute their progress to different factors of which this paper is attempting to reveal.

This study attempts to investigate how cultural beliefs, expectations and experience that the ESL learners bring to their classroom affect their sense of progress. This investigation is framed by theoretical and empirical studies (Allwright, 1991) in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA), especially those which view the classroom as a culture (Van Lier, 1988; Holliday, 1994). This study is grounded within a socio-cultural theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

Allwright (1991) focuses on the need to investigate the relationship between the events in the classroom and what learners bring and take away. Allwright (1991) believes that a description of classroom language learning depends heavily on how classroom interaction is influenced by what people bring into the lesson and how are learning opportunities created and exploited through the processes of classroom interaction.

Holliday (1994), like Allwright (1991), is interested in what happens in the process stage. However, he considers it insufficient to investigate only within the classroom. Holliday emphasizes looking within and around the classroom since most of what happens inside classrooms is influenced by contextual factors. He makes an important typological distinction for the investigation of classrooms. He distinguishes two levels of action within the classroom, calling them surface and deep levels of action. He explains these levels as, “whereas surface action is plain to see, deep action phenomena are those which are opaque to outsiders and perhaps only tacitly understood by insiders in the culture” (ibid., p. 40).

Second language learning often involves learning how to view two different cultures. An ideal ESL classroom should encourage learners to make efforts to understand both cultures and to help them remove cultural misconceptions and biases. Learners should be guided to look at both cultures more critically. This principle is derived from Schumann's theory of acculturation (Stern, 1997). According to Schumann (1978), acculturation is the process of becoming adapted to a new culture. While Schumann intended his theory to account for second language acquisition, Gardner (1985) perceives it as being pertinent to second language learning in schools (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Gardner observed that cultural beliefs have an imperative impact on language learners. For this reason, this paper will take a critical look at how misconceptions and misunderstandings caused by

cross-cultural differences may have an effect on ESL learners' sense of progress.

Definition of "Culture"

"But what exactly is culture?" as some of the participants asked me in the beginning of the study. This is a fundamental question. Street (1993) suggests this is not an easy question to answer, particularly in an increasingly international world. The notion of culture was first introduced into the field of second language research by Fries (1945) and Lado (1957), who considered first culture as a factor influencing second language acquisition (cited in Li, 2003). Simply put, culture is the learned way of beliefs, behaviors, perceptions and the products of these that is common within human groups and serves to distinguish that culture group from another learning different beliefs and behaviors.

Cortazzi & Jin (1996) coined a more related term to language classroom practices which is "culture of learning". By this term they mean "that much behavior in language classrooms is set within taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitute good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education" (p.169).

Hinkle (1999) states that "culture is sometimes identified with notions of personal space, appropriate gestures, time, and so forth" (p.1). While these concepts are certainly manifestations of cultural norms, the impact of culture as discussed in this paper is both broader and deeper, defining the way ESL learners perceive the cross-cultural impact on their sense of progress.

Significance of the Study

Researchers seem to agree that when there is less cultural dissonance, there is more learning taking place (Bennett, 1995). Kramsch (1991) stated that culture and language are inseparable and constitute "a domain of experience," while Byram (1989) believed that culture represents "hidden curriculum" for second language teaching (cited in Hinkle, 1999, p. 6). Bruner (1996) claims that "learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources" (p. 4). Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) did a qualitative study and found that language skills, academic issues, and social interaction were the most difficult adjustment problem areas for ESL students. These students were more likely to have positive academic and nonacademic experiences if they could adapt to and enjoy contact with the host community, and their successful achievement of academic goals is more likely if the emotional and social atmosphere is pleasant and the environment congenial.

Thus, the understanding of ESL students' cultural background, learning experiences and styles by their teachers, and the understanding of Western culture and educational systems by these ESL students will all contribute to the ways these ESL learners sense their progress and success in learning.

Although there are many studies about ESL students, Wan (2001) found there is a need to analyze the situation from a cross-cultural perspective. It is hoped that a cross-cultural look can help educators to learn more about these students and will assist the students in reflecting on their own cross-cultural learning experiences. If one accepts the contention that culture impacts our development, then learners' sense of progress is affected by the cultural schemata a student presents in the classroom.

Methodology

Rationale for a Qualitative Study

In this study, qualitative research methods including participant observation and informal interviews are used. There are several considerations for choosing this research approach: (1) It is believed that the research question will be better answered, understood and explained through interpreting and describing rather than measuring. (2) The research questions are general, broad, open-ended and flexible. There is no previously set hypothesis to be tested. (3) The purpose of this study is not to seek explanations and predications that will generalize to other people and places, but to "subjectively derive understanding from the perspective of observed persons in their own milieu" (Sprinthall, Schmutte & Sirois, 1991).

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at Carleton University, intensive writing class (IC 30) over one semester. The participants were four students from Saudi Arabia and three students from China, all in their second semester in the university (see table 1). In the very few days of my research, it was my intention to compare and contrast the two distinct cultural groups, the Chinese and the Saudi Arabian. However, as I was observing the classroom and taking field notes, I began to notice that differences occurred within the same culture. I then decided to draw on the participants' experiences and how the cultural differences may impact their sense of progress without comparing the two cultures.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Table 1 Student Background Information

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Country	Semester in university	Months in Canada
Student A	M	19	China	2	7 months
Student B	F	18	China	2	6 months
Student C	M	19	Saudi Arabia	2	6 months
Student D	M	20	Saudi Arabia	2	9 months
Student E	M	19	Saudi Arabia	2	7 months
Student F	M	20	China	2	7 months
Student G	M	19	Saudi Arabia	2	6 months

I made use of purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1991, p. 48). This method of sampling ensured that the researcher gathered relevant information. Purposeful sampling also ensured the trustworthiness of the research because the respondents were chosen to be most suitable for the general topic of the research. All the participants in this study were not only new to Carleton University but most importantly new to Canada. The fact that they are still new and that the educational system they come from is still fresh in their minds and obvious in their learning styles and beliefs gives them a better position to compare and judge the cross-cultural difference that might affect their sense of progress.

Data Collection

In this classroom-centered research, data were collected through various qualitative methods including participant observation, individual and group in-depth interviews, questionnaires (appendix A), and field notes which helped to triangulate the data collection. The atmosphere was informal and relaxed, so the student participants and the researcher were able to engage in friendly and informative conversations. All interviews were audio taped and then transcribed for analysis afterwards. Data were also collected by observations of the participants in their classroom twice a week for about two months. Notes were taken after these observations. Different types of data were analyzed by comparing and contrasting at several levels to check for emerging themes.

The rationale in adopting a classroom-centered research is that classrooms act as communication contexts within which events are socially-constructed. According to Allwright & Bailey (1991), classroom-centered research concentrates on classroom interaction and what goes on between and among teachers and students in order to gain insights and increase our understanding of classroom learning and teaching. The learners bring with them their experience of learning, of life and prior knowledge and the

teacher brings experience of life and teaching and learning. The teacher also brings into the classroom the syllabus, the method and a concept of atmosphere in which learning and teaching will take place (Allwright & Bailey 1991, p. 22).

I also conducted individual interviews followed by group interviews. This was a very effective and useful way to proceed as it gave me the opportunity to first interview each student separately and then allowed the students not only to interact with the subject matter under discussion but also to interpret, argue and disagree with each other during the group interviews. Interviews, like all social interactions, are co-constructed, meaning that both the interviewee and the interviewer shape (Block, 2000). However, Woods (1996) points out two dangers of this kind of research that requires the subjects to introspect and self-report which are “the possibility of that the processes of verbalization could alter the process we are interested in studying” and “that the data resulting from the verbalizations of the subjects may not reflect precisely what was going on.”

The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions with two open-ended questions assigned as in-class reflection exercises and given at two different times. The two open ended questions read as follows: (1) what are the cultural differences between your home country and Canada? (2) How do the cultural differences between your home country and Canada help or hurt your sense of progress while learning English? The first question was more general than the second one. I was trying to get the students think in a broader sense without blocking their minds or restricting their thoughts to academic and language differences. In the second question, however, I was specifically looking for how do these ESL students view cultural differences and whether or not they think these differences influence their progress.

Data Analysis

Because I hoped to gain a good and comprehensive understanding of how cross-cultural differences may affect the participants’ sense of progress, I employed the grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to this type of qualitative research, data analysis is an inductive and on-going process. This approach, as the case with most ethnographic methods, offers a move toward a “systematically documenting teaching-learning interactions in rich, contextualized detail with the aim of developing grounded theory (i.e., theory generated from data)” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Patton (1990) defines inductive analysis as “patterns, themes, and categories of analysis emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (p. 390).

This research has received the approval of the ethics committee at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language studies at Carleton

University. All Participants signed the informed consent forms and were given pseudonyms in order to respect their anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

At first all the participants claimed that they were highly motivated and they felt satisfied with the progress they were making in learning English (see Figure 1). Also, four participants in their answers to the questionnaire stated that the cultural differences did not have a serious impact on their development and sense of progress while the other three felt that they made their progress somewhat difficult (see Figure 2). However, the participants who stated in the questionnaires that they are highly motivated learners turned out to be frustrated, depressed and discouraged learners during the interviews. The in-depth interview data was really helpful in helping me to discover what the participants really think instead of what they what me to think. Therefore, I found that the participants were highly conscious of the cultural differences existing in the two countries, in which they have lived. They have likes and dislikes for living in both countries. They shared their dilemmas and frustrations of being cross-cultural learners and how the cross-cultural differences affect their progress and success in learning English.

Figure 1 Participants and Level of Satisfaction

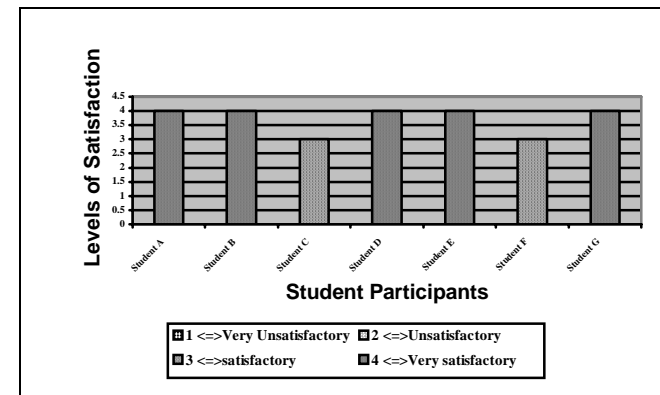
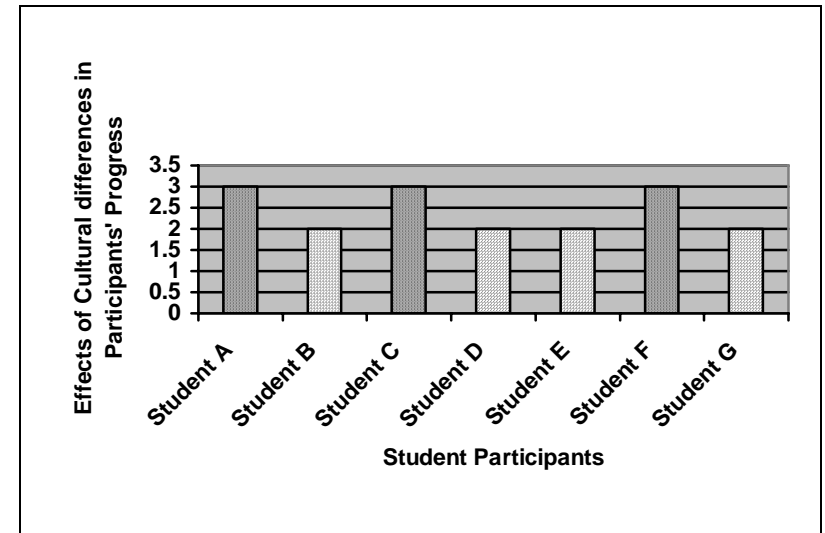


Figure 2 Participants' Beliefs in the Effects of Cultural Differences in their Progress



The First Look at the Classroom

From the first class I have observed, I could gather from the learners' behavior and attitude that some of them were unsure of what was being taught in class. The lack of understanding was manifested in the learners' inability to communicate effectively in class. Some of the learners showed an apathetic attitude towards their schoolwork.

I have also noticed that all seven learners formed groups of the same mother tongue speakers. This caused closed social groups of learners who distanced themselves from other learners who did not speak their mother tongue. It was apparent that these exclusive groupings placed a barrier on the learners' ability to communicate effectively in the language of teaching and learning.

In the next section, I will discuss the themes that emerged from the data and refer to supporting literature as well as quotations from the transcribed audio-recordings of the interviews and field notes. The themes are discussed as follows:

Cross-cultural differences cause a break in communication

Effective learning can only take place if the teacher and learners have a common understanding of the concepts of what the teacher is teaching. Piper (1993) describes the learning process as, "a negotiation between teachers

meaning and students' understanding, a sort of give and take between teacher and student as they construct shared understanding through face to face communication" (p. 7).

Through the interviews some of the student participants expressed certain amount of difficulty to follow the lesson, "It is difficult sometimes when the teacher speaks to us or reads," Student A noted. Their inability to follow the lesson in class is worsened by the fact that they were unable to read and understand the learning support material, "But I am struggling with the small words" and "Some other words I find difficult and I cannot figure out what does these words mean," a comment made by Student E. Lack of effective communication hinders interpersonal relationships. Ehrman and Dornyei (1995, p. 5) describe the effect of ineffective communication in the class as follows: "...learning is enhanced by good interpersonal relations or seriously hindered by disfunctional interaction between teachers and students and among students. Interpersonal friction can divert energy and attention away from the learning task."

Ineffective communication between teacher and learner are also caused by the fact that the learner's communication needs are not being met by their communicating abilities and fluency in the language of teaching. This was evident in the classroom I observed. Some learners who speak the same mother tongue tend to sit close to each other. One day, I heard student C asking student G in their mother tongue, Arabic, of the meaning of a word that the teacher was describing. Interestingly, student G who has been asked did not know the answer himself. In an informal conversation with them after that class, I asked them about this specific incident and they said, "Sometimes we lose communication with the teacher. We did not understand what she was saying. And we are used to translating each and every word in our native language which is Arabic."

Also, some Chinese were using the translation machine during class time. Student B stated, "I can not live without a translation machine...It is like a hidden teacher in classroom...It gives me the meaning of any words I am not sure of their meanings." I had a look at one of these translation machines and noticed that they were using English-Chinese instead of English-English translation. When I asked student A of the reason why he was using English-Chinese translation instead of English-English, he replied, "it is easier and quicker especially in the classroom when the teacher speaks...I do not want to miss what the teacher is saying...otherwise I feel really discouraged when I do not follow up the teacher in the classroom."

Similarly, a sense of failure and lack of progress was identified in the interviews due to the fact that the learners could not communicate in their language of instruction: "I feel disappointed when I speak English with my teacher and peers and they do not understand what I am trying to say," students G remarked. Also, lack of insight into what is being taught in class

leads to the learners feeling helpless and despondent. Student C revealed that "I feel I am lost. The teacher stands there and explains and I'm the one that does not understand." The learners find it difficult to communicate their thoughts in the language of teaching, especially when they have to communicate with the teacher: "It is difficult when I speak with the teacher," student E stated.

Learners perceive their language of instruction and the language they speak at home as two different entities. When they try speaking their language of instruction to communicate with their friends or family members outside the class, they are ridiculed and labeled. Student B stated that "when I speak English at home all my family start laughing at me because I sound funny... And if I go on speaking in English, they will become mad at me and start accusing me of abandoning my cultural identity and becoming Americanized."

Styles of communication

Communication is the sending and receiving of messages. What people say, how they say it, and what they don't say are all deeply affected by culture (Storti, 1999). The differences between two "poles of directness and indirectness" account for more cross-cultural misunderstandings than any other single factor (Storti, p. 91).

Indirect cultures tend to infer, suggest, and imply, rather than say things directly. There is a tendency toward indirectness and away from confrontation. However, direct cultures tend to be more individualistic. People need to spell things out, that is, they need to be explicit in communicating their desires, likes, dislikes, and feelings. People say exactly what they mean, rather than suggesting or implying it. Thus, the spoken word carries most of the meaning.

An interesting example related to cross-cultural differences regarding style of communication was mentioned by Student F, back home, when the teacher makes any comments or feedback whether verbal or written, I will take it seriously. But the case here in Canada is different. I do not know for sure what the teacher means by his feedback...For example, one day and after I gave a presentation, the teacher said "well done, your presentation was interesting." But when I received the mark, I was so confused and disappointed and felt that I am making no progress because I did not expect this low mark. I went to the teacher and asked her directly whether my presentation was good or not and she replied "yes, of course, it was good.

It is clear that the teacher was not direct in her feedback while the student expected every comment made by the teacher to be simply straightforward. For him "Yes" means "yes" and "no" means "no." He went on saying, "the teacher should have been direct in her comment. I am used in

my culture to interpret things as they mean. I do not blame the teacher....I quite understand that maybe she was trying to be nice and not make me feel bad.”

Teacher and students role expectation

In some contexts, students may believe that the teacher should do all the things for their students’ learning and should provide feedback at almost every stage of learning. Others may believe in independent mode of learning and self-monitoring. Mantle-Bromley (1995) acknowledged that some students may come to foreign language instruction “with certain attitudes, beliefs, and expectations that may actually prove harmful to their success in the classroom” (p.383). Language learning could thus be hindered if students have specific beliefs that do not meet their expectations. This was evident in Student’s B comment when she remarked that “I always expect that the teacher provide me with everything. I am here to learn and he is here to teach...” Her comment was followed by the following short conversation:

Researcher: *“Can you give me an example?”*

Student B: *“One day I asked my teacher to give me some references related to my topic but she refused and told me that this was my responsibility.”*

Researcher: *“Why do not you take the initiative and do some searching first?”*

Student B: *“well, I do not have time to go and search. If the teacher knows any references, she should help me in everyway she can. Back home in China, the teacher provides the learners with nearly every thing like books, articles and even the topic itself. In Canada, sometimes I am left to do a lot of unnecessary work that could be done easily with the help of the teacher.”*

Expectations about educational roles that participants bring to the classroom influence not only their views of the class, but also their willingness to participate in different kinds of learning activities. Learners may bring to class the expectations regarding teacher relationships and behavior that prevailed in their home countries, especially if they had extensive schooling there (McCargar, 1993).

Furthermore, some learners also want teachers to maintain a clearly ordered pattern of classroom activity and, perhaps, engage in extensive correction of grammatical form or pronunciation during all activities rather than at specified points in a lesson or not at all. This was clear in Student F comment when he said, “I expect the teacher to correct me whenever I make any mistake.” Student A pointed out an incident when he was disappointed

because the teacher did not correct his pronunciation mistakes while he was giving a presentation which made him to look “foolish in front of everybody.” Thus, failure to conform to these ideals may give learners the impression of lazy or inadequate class preparation on the part of the teacher.

Appropriate topics for instruction

Cultural expectations regarding the nature of education and what is appropriate to talk about may affect the kinds of topics students are willing to pursue in class. Cultural as well as personal sensitivity is vital in knowing when, and how to introduce topics or lessons that may be distasteful or difficult. Even apparently innocuous topics can be sources of difficulty, depending on the experience, sophistication level, and particular social situation of learners. For example, student D felt the lessons on “fast food or skiing” may be inappropriate because “they are not related directly to his culture.” This problem become clearer when trying to communicate with other people from different cultures who do not share the same cultural background as student C stated.

The cultural differences hinder learning English because it is difficult to extract the common ground that is necessary for conversation. The lack of common ground with the native speakers or any other people who have different cultural background further limits the range of conversation.

Clearly, instructor discretion is essential in these areas. Sensitive topics can be raised, but the way they are treated and the extent of student participation expected should allow a range of alternatives, including the option to simply observe activities or, where possible, respond in writing rather than speaking up.

Range of Alternatives

Different Writing Styles

As the class I have observed was a writing one, I will focus in this part of the paper on the cultural difficulties that ESL writers face in ESL writing classroom. One of the settings deeply affected by multiculturalism is the writing classroom because writing as artifact is a form of both personal and cultural expression. In general, writing is the most highly valued skill in the Western universities but the least frequently developed skill for most ESL learners in language classroom. Thus, a mismatch between the past experience of ESL writers and the expectations of Western academic writing teachers comes into the picture.

Most ESL writers have relatively little experience of systematic discourse even in their own languages. The discourse models and the writer’s intentions that these students have experienced in their home

countries are radically different from what it is expected from them in the Western Universities (Connor & Kaplan, 1987). The essays that these ESL students were used to write tend to be literary works of art rather than argument based on critical analysis. So these students have very little experience of critical thinking and using writing to develop and extend their own ideas based on findings and theories of others. ESL students not only have to struggle with the correctness of language but most importantly show in their essays that they can systematically organize their ideas into an argument that will produce a well-supported controversial topic.

The participants reported some instance on the influence of cultural differences in their writing. An often occurring complaint from some ESL students with very competent English is that they have received a very low mark and much criticism from their teachers in a comparison and contrast essay. Although these students have sufficient data about the topic they are writing about and know the linguistic forms and structures appropriate for signaling and marking comparisons, their essays have been severely criticized because they had not gone beyond simple parallel comparison, and had not made any critical analysis. Most of these students are most upset at this criticism, explaining that it was not their “roles as students to criticize or evaluate the views of eminent scholars or to tell their reader (teacher) what they think” as explained by student E. Furthermore, student F stated that “when I wrote an essay in my home country, I was given very good marks. Many teachers were happy with my writing style... But in Canada, they want you to be critical and not just simply state facts.” Here we have a clear example of different cultural norms producing misunderstanding. Writing in many societies is regarded as a public place where appropriate behavior must be displayed, rather than as a vehicle for the analysis and extension of knowledge.

Furthermore, ESL writers, like all writers who come to a writing class, represent a wide range of needs and abilities. They bring in their work all stages of the composition process, from understanding the assignment and brainstorming for ideas to making revisions and polishing the final draft. Some need guidance only on polishing the final draft of their papers, while others have difficulty with syntax and word endings. While ESL writers are as intelligent as any other writer, they are limited in their expression of this intelligence by their “unfamiliarity with standard American English,” as pointed out by student A.

Mismatch of goals and methods of teaching

Placed in a cross-cultural learning environment, mismatch of goals and different methods of teaching are likely to result in frustration and mistaken attributions on the part of both teachers and students. In recalling his learning experience, Student E stated that “although the American system

places a very peripheral role to memorization, I think it is helpful and important to me.” He went on saying that “I am not expected to memorize according to the Western system, but I do still memorize especially new words and I find it very useful.” It seems that this student is clinging to his old learning style. When I asked him of the reason why he feels frustrated with the way new words are taught in Canada, he replied,

"Well, partly because of the new learning styles that I have to adopt, but most importantly the teacher's beliefs and the narrow-mindedness of the Western system in that they do not appreciate the work of any student when s/he starts memorizing let's say new words. This makes me frustrated and confused. Why do American teachers think we hate our education system? I think we should appreciate each others' system. The grammar translation method is useful just like the communicative method. Each teaching style has its own strengths and weaknesses. Besides, I feel that I have achieved something only when I show that I can recite it."

Then, I asked him if he experienced any specific incident he would like to share and he stated,

"Yes, one day, a teacher asked the class to study some new words for a coming test. She said that we should write them down and use them in sentences that show the possible context they may occur in. In the next class, I did not use the words in a context, but just memorized them and their meanings. Here where the misinterpretations and misunderstandings clearly occurred. The teacher got furious and hinted that I am a lazy student and memorizing the words may not help me learn the words effectively."

This clearly shows that there was a goal mismatch that caused this misunderstanding. The teacher's goal was not only help the learners pass the test but help them understand the meaning of the words and use them in proper context. On the other hand, the goal for student E was just to pass the test. During this discussion, student B commented that:

"There are some differences in focus between the Chinese English teachers and Canadian teachers. Different goals cause the different ways of teaching. In China teachers

just teach us the grammar, the vocabulary and how to pass the test. In Canada, I find that teachers also want us to pass the CAEL, but they also focus on our studying skills. So, teachers in both countries have their unique teaching methods. On the one hand, Chinese teachers give us a strong foundation in English words and sentences, and Canadian teachers make us better in communication and how to study well. On the other hand, in China we couldn't do the practices that can improve our English skills and knowledge and in Canada we also can't easily remember all of the words that we had learned. Actually, I don't think the cultural difference have a great impact on my progress because we have different goals in different places. One to get a higher score in final exam and the other is to learn how to communicate and how to study in the university."

All students explained that the culture of learning they all come from emphasizes knowledge of vocabulary and grammar whereas the Western culture of learning stress communication skills, language use and the process of learning. Interestingly, most of them, except student B felt that there is some difficulty in adapting to this new teaching method. As student B kept saying "I am learning here more than back home. The most important thing is that I learn day by day. I like the communicative method of teaching but I think the grammar and vocabulary are still important. A balance between the two will work better, I guess."

Learning Styles

It is not uncommon that ESL learners adhere tenaciously to the learning strategies that have worked so well for them in their home countries. They assume that hard work correlates with success and so if they do poorly in an early test in a course they are prepared to work even longer hours to improve their grades. However, this may not be true because if they are working in a reproductive rather than an analytic style, their grades may still not improve significantly. Their difficulties lie in the mismatch of expectations about the styles of learning that are required (Ballard, B. 1996). Other research also indicated a significant relationship between student achievement level and their learning style preferences (e.g. Park, 1997). Some of the learning styles differences that surfaced in the data are discussed below:

Group Learning

Kinsella (1996) observed that despite the advantages of pairing and grouping strategies, not all learners in ESL classrooms embraced collaborative

classroom learning with the same zeal as their instructors. In fact, such well-intended instructional efforts as group strategies may be met with reluctance and disorientation on the part of some ESL learners due to their cultural backgrounds.

Student F dislikes working alone, and he seldom takes initiative on his independent projects. When questioned, student F stated that he prefers working in groups and likes helping classmates. He stated, "I hate working by myself. I like to help others and we can learn from each other. Why can't we work together?" However, student D preferred working individually. He stated that, "I like to work alone. In all my past classes in Saudi Arabia, I worked alone. Teachers rarely organized any group work. I feel group work takes a lot of the class time."

Silence or engagement in class discussions

Most ESL learners react in either of two ways to their silence and incapacity to join in class discussion. Some explain their failure in terms of their language problems. "I do not have the words to say what I think...By the time I have worked out what I want to say, the other speakers have moved to another point," student C complained. Others like student G said, "I am shy to speak in public because the others may not understand what I am saying and it makes everything slow down." I asked some of them what do they do then, and some like student E replied, "I wait till someone else expresses what I wanted to say, and then I feel better." But many of these students recognize an additional constraint. As student B explained, "I do not wish to be like other students who criticize each other and even contradict their lecturer. Such behavior is not proper, I think"

The classroom situation is not a natural situation for the learner. Student C mentioned that "...during break I feel secure to speak out. But, in class I do not have the courage to speak out and take the risk in making mistakes." Traditionally teachers expect learners to adapt to the culture of the school (Purkey, 2000). But some ESL learners are unable to adjust to the new learning environment. The result is that many ESL learners face daily depreciation, dissatisfaction and frustration which will ultimately affect the way they sense their progress.

Lack of Questions

Most of the ESL learners in the classroom I observed asked few questions during class time. When asked of the reason why they did not ask questions in the classroom, most of them replied: "I am too shy," "other students may laugh at me," or "I am afraid of making mistakes." A common factor behind these reasons is 'face', that most ESL learners do not want others to laugh at them or at their mistakes because they will lose face in the classroom. This problem is more noticed among the Chinese students than the Arab students.

The reason behind this is the collective nature of the Chinese society in that students are expected not to lose their face by taking the risk and asking questions in front of everybody else. Related to this point is the belief that when Chinese students ask questions, they will think of its benefit for the rest of the class (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). On the other hands, the Arab students in the study felt that they take into their considerations both the “collective and the individual needs” as mentioned by students C, D, E and G.

One interesting incident that occurred in one of the classes I observed is related to the students’ lack of questions. The teacher set up a peer activity and explained what she wanted the students to do. She required them to read each other draft essays and write comments for each other in separate sheets of papers that she provided them and which they have to hand in at the end of the class. Once the students started working in the activity, I noticed the majority of the students were not doing the activity properly and some just remained silent. Student D explained his uncertainty of what they were supposed to do. The teacher explained the activity once more. However, there were two Chinese students who were not still doing the activity properly and remained silent nearly till the end of the class when the teacher approached them and discovered that they were not in the right track.

I asked these two students A & F for the reason of not doing the activity properly and that they should have asked the teacher for clarification and they responded that “it is the teacher’s duty to explain the activity in the right way. Besides we felt shy to ask for help as the majority of the students were in the right track and we did not want to disturb the class.” However, they also admitted that part of their failure in completing the activity was the fact that they might not have been paying full attention to the teacher’s instruction. This was apparent in student F comment when he said, “I know I was not paying attention to the instructions of the teacher...And I felt shy to ask the teacher to explain the activity once more...I would rather remain silent.” However, most ESL teachers value the importance of questions not only as signs of students’ interests and involvement in class discussions, but also indicators of problematic areas which, in turn, foster the teacher to further elaborate and explain these spots of misunderstanding or difficulties.

Limitations of the study

While I made every effort to ensure the validity of the present study through adopting a variety of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis like participants’ observation and interviews, it is important to note several limitations of this study. One such limitation is that the data gathered were based on the reported experiences and assumptions of the participants. The validity of such reported accounts cannot be judged in any definitive way. I

can not be very sure whether the participants were very sincere and direct in reporting their experiences or simply tried to edit those experiences.

Moreover, as most of the participants obviously had high expectations of their progress, it is possible that their assessments of themselves as ESL learners were unrealistically critical. Furthermore, the naturalistic study like this one always has a major limitation in making any generalizations due to limited sample size. Perhaps a more in-depth longitudinal study over the length of several years with a larger number of participants from wider cultural backgrounds would provide a more complete picture of how students' sense of progress may be influenced by cross-cultural differences.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

It was my intention in this explorative, descriptive, and qualitative study to obtain insight and understanding in respect of how cross-cultural differences may facilitate or hinder ESL learners' sense of progress. The finding showed that the participants showed some consciousness towards the impact of the cross-cultural differences between their home countries and Canada in their language learning progress.

ESL learners, as any other learners, do not live in a social vacuum. In fact, before taking up their role in the classroom, they are participants in a cultural milieu and their beliefs and assumptions about modes of behavior and knowledge are structured by the culture of the community in which they function (Shamim, 1996). The question here is not whether the cultural patterns of the community are good or bad or whether they should be encouraged or reversed in the classroom. The fact is that they are there as important variables that influence the way learners perceive, classify, judge and sense their progress. Therefore, the cultural patterns need to be taken into consideration by practitioners, planners and policy makers alike.

Although it was not my intention to find solutions to the problem of cultural differences in ESL classrooms, it is worth noting that recent studies find that the academic performance of ESL students greatly improves when teachers have high expectations for their students, get to know students, engage with students in meaningful and genuine ways, and follow a curriculum that is culturally relevant to the lives of students (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1994; McLaughlin & McLeod, 1996; Rivera & Poplin, 1997).

In this paper, I focused mainly on the perceptions of the majority of the participants in the language classroom – the students – to give a partial picture of the larger scene. However, these perceptions are unlikely to be the whole truth for several reasons. First, students are changing and their cultures evolve and change over time. What we perceive as cultural differences may not be true and if it is true it may not be always true over a long period of time. Besides, differences occur within individuals in the same

culture. Thus, it was my intention to attempt to raise conscious awareness of differences in cultures of learning, making them explicit so that teachers and learners would articulate their expectations of each other and how such cultural differences may affect the way learners sense their own progress either positively or negatively.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Name: _____

1. How would you describe your satisfaction with your progress in English since you have been in Canada?

- (a) It is fantastic and much better than my expectation
- (b) I am satisfied
- (c) I am a little disappointing
- (d) I am very disappointing
- (e) I do not know

2. What are your goals for learning English?

- (a) My goal is to speak and write like a native speaker
- (b) My goal is to speak and write very very well but not exactly like a native speaker
- (c) My goal is to speak and write well enough to succeed well in my studies
- (d) My goal is to speak and write just enough to get through CAEL
- (e) I do not have any goal

3. How do you feel you are doing in your English compared to others?

- (a) I am doing much better than other students and my friends
- (b) I am doing about the same as other students and my friends
- (c) I am doing not as well as other student and my friends
- (d) I do not know
- (e) I do not compare myself to others

4. Answer this question only if you are doing BETTER than you expected learning English since you have been in Canada. What is the MAIN reason for this?

- (a) It is due to my own effort
- (b) It is due to my teachers
- (c) It is due to the way English is taught here
- (d) It is due to using English outside the classroom
- (e) It is due to my too low expectations

5. Answer this question only if you are doing WORSE than you expected learning English since you have been in Canada. What is the MAIN reason for this?

- (a) It is due to my lack of effort
- (b) It is due to my teachers
- (c) It is due to the way English is taught in my classes
- (d) It is due to difficulty using English outside the classroom
- (e) It is due to my too high expectations

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6. What level of motivation do you have for learning English?

- (a) I have a high level of motivation
- (b) I have an average level of motivation
- (c) I have a low level of motivation
- (d) I have no motivation
- (e) I don't know

7. In class during break, and when the teacher leaves the classroom, what language do you use?

- (a) I speak to my friends in my native language
- (b) I mostly speak in my native language but sometimes in English too
- (c) I mostly speak English and sometimes I speak in my native language
- (d) I avoid speaking in my native language unless it is an emergency
- (e) I do not speak at all

8. How many of your friends in Canada speak your language?

- (a) All my friends in Canada speak my language
- (b) Most of my friends in Canada speak my language
- (c) About half of my friends in Canada speak my language
- (d) A few of my friends in Canada speak my language
- (e) None of my friends in Canada speak my language

9. Outside the classroom, how much of the time do you use your own language?

- (a) I only use my own language
- (b) I use my own language most of the time
- (c) I use my own language about half the time
- (d) I only use my own language occasionally
- (e) I never use my own language

10. What is the MAIN reason you do not use English more outside the classroom?

- (a) Because I think that it is not important for reaching my goals
- (b) Because I am too shy
- (c) Because Canadian people are not easy to approach
- (d) Because my friends will think I am rude
- (e) I do not know

11. How do the methods and ways of teaching used in English classes at Carleton affect your progress?

- (a) They are the same as those used in my country
- (b) They are different from those used in my country and this blocks my progress
- (c) They are different from those used in my country and this helps my progress
- (d) They are different from those used in my country but this doesn't affect my progress
- (e) I do not know

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12. How do the obstacles you face in learning English in Canada affect your progress?

- (a) They are very serious and make it impossible to succeed
- (b) They are challenging but with very hard work I think I can succeed
- (c) They are challenging but I will have no problem succeeding
- (d) There are no serious obstacles at all
- (e) I do not know

13. By which area of your English do you MAINLY judge your progress?

- (a) My ability to speak and have a conversation in English
- (b) My ability to write in English
- (c) My ability to read English
- (d) My ability to listen and understand English speakers
- (e) All of them

14. What affect do the cultural differences between Canada and your country have on your English learning in Canada?

- (a) They make my progress in English very difficult
- (b) They make my progress somewhat difficult
- (c) They have no significant effect on my progress in English
- (d) They help my progress in English
- (e) I do not know

15. How helpful is the feedback you get from your teacher in your

- (a) It is very helpful and I use it all the time to progress
- (b) It somewhat helpful and I use it sometimes
- (c) It is not helpful and I do not really pay attention to it
- (d) It makes me feel like I am not progressing
- (e) I do not know

16. How do you MAINLY judge your progress in English?

- (a) Based on my ESL grades and test results
- (b) Based on my ESL teacher's comments and feedback
- (c) Based on the grades my classmates get
- (d) Based on listening to people and having conversations outside the classroom
- (e) Based on my grades and feedback in my academic courses

17. How well do you think your grades reflect your progress in English?

- (a) My grades are a very good indicator of how I am doing in English
- (b) Sometimes my grades are a good indicator and sometimes not
- (c) My grades give a bad indication of how I am doing in English
- (d) Grades have nothing to do with how I am doing in English
- (e) I do not know

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18. In general, how good are you at learning foreign languages?

- (a) I am really very good at learning foreign languages and I have been very successful
- (b) I am about average at learning languages
- (c) Learning languages is not something that I am good at and I have not been very successful
- (d) I am not good at learning foreign languages but if I have to do it I can
- (f) I do not know

19. What level of ESL are you in?

- (a) IC 10-15
- (b) IC 20-25-30-PPD
- (c) ESLA 1300
- (d) ESLA 1500
- (e) ESLA 1900-1905

20. How long have you been in Canada?

- (a) Four months or less (one term or less)
- (b) Five to eight months (about two terms)
- (c) Nine months to a year (about three terms)
- (d) More than one year and less than two
- (e) More than two years

Please, write your reflections on the following questions:

- (1) What are the cultural differences between your home country and Canada?
- (2) How do the cultural differences between your home country and Canada help or hurt your sense of progress while learning English?