

**LALS 5201 Reflection
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Why Do They Do It?

**A Reflection on Issues Surrounding the Issue of
Chinese Student Motivation.**

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RESTRICTED

**UNDER 17 REQUIRES ACCOMPANYING PARENT OF ADULT
GUARDIAN**

WARNING: this reflection contains gross generalizations which may or may not reflect the beliefs of the author but which may hold grains of truth at their centres and which just happened to come out of his fingertips when he began exploring this topic. Reader discretion is advised.

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When I caught three of them plagiarizing a free-writing activity, I knew there was something about the Chinese students in my SDLL (Self-Directed Language Learning) class that I didn't quite understand. This journal entry is in pursuit of answers. But first a little background.

First off, who are these people? Well, without exception, the Chinese students in my class are genuinely nice people. They're polite, respectful and...well...sort of naïve. They speak to each other in Chinese. The boys sit on one side of the class. The girls on the other...well...except for the one rebel guy who tends to do his own thing. If I had to equate them to Canadian students on the self-possessed maturity scale, I'd put them around grade 10.

Second, what's their work like? Well, overall let's just say their work "done" rather than "well done." The route taken is usually the route of least resistance...the easy way. Their locus of control is, for the most part, clearly external: Teacher tells me what to do. I do it. And they don't tend to ask to many "why" questions...well too many questions at all. Sure the same could be said for many non-Chinese students...but I'm not talking about them right now.

And third, why are they studying English here at Carleton? Well, that's the question isn't it? And it's a question I am not currently in a position to answer. My assumption is that it is the standard response: better job in the future and so on. But who can say. Now, on we go in the pursuit of answers.

One place I want to look for potential answers is in a journal entry I had students do a week or so ago. In it, I asked students to compare university life in China with university life in Canada. Great activity. Should have done it earlier. Here are a few of the issues that came up and that may illustrate why I don't think I understand my students quite as much as I thought I did.

According to the journals, in China much of the "hard work" in school comes early on. Elementary school and high school, it seems, are characterized by early mornings, late nights and piles of endless studying. Why? Well, because in a nation of 1.3 billion, university seats come at a premium and parents as a group are keen to see their kids – well, "kid" actually...but that comes later – sitting in them. But after they have succeeded in getting into university, according to these journals, students are able to relax somewhat. Which must be nice after all that hard work. However, unfortunately, for Chinese students who come to Canada finds that the tables have been turned. Instead of relaxing, students find that in Canada – by some cruel twist of fate for students who struggled all those years to enjoy the relative ease of university - much of the "hard work" of university comes after you're admitted.

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The journals also point to incongruities between the large teacher-centred classes of China and the smaller student-centred classes of Canada. Students seem surprised by the Canadian style. “Hey,” they think, “this is not the way it is supposed to work.” “The way it is supposed to work is that the teacher talks...I stay quiet and listen...then I tell the teacher what he/she said.” With this in mind then, it’s little wonder I have to pry answers out of some students with a crowbar and a dental drill.

And lastly, while the journals don’t point to it overtly, they do suggest some issues that may or may not be related to the One Child Policy.

The One Child Policy was adopted (ouch...nice word choice) by the Chinese government in 1980 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/941511.stm>). This means that many of the Chinese students now coming to Carleton, a large number in their early 20’s are likely on the leading edge of this group. And this means - well, it may not mean but it certainly suggests - that such a classful of “only” children may have different needs, wants and learning styles than those who do not...perhaps those who came before. A few thoughts:

- only children may be closer to their peers: only children are, as the label implies, the only children in a household. What might this suggest? Well, playing psychologist for a second, it might suggest that if there are no other siblings to play with, then these only children will develop closer relationships with their friends than might otherwise be the case...and maybe even more so given that the emphasis in the Chinese system rests on the collective rather than the individual. Journal entries appear to support this notion. Most students spent a lot of time writing about what they did with their friends, where they ate – did you know at one student’s university they had over 50 different restaurants on the campus, each catering to a different region of China – and the sports they played, rather than talking about what kinds of subjects they studied. They also talked about how this sense of camaraderie (comrade!) made its way into the living arrangements on campus. Evidently, in China most students live on campus in dorm rooms with between 3 and 7 other students. Wow, talk about personal space issues!
- only children may be pampered: being one of four kids, I can’t truly imagine what it’s like to be an only child...well not really. But certainly an only child would receive a lot more attention than one in a larger family and perhaps more financial resources would be made available to that child. Perhaps a mixture of pampering and pressure. Reverence of parents: also being an only child may lead to students having closer ties with their parents...although I may be talking through my hat here not having a background as either a psychologist or an only child. However, what I have seen in many of the Chinese students is a

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profound sense of duty to their families. In fact, in their journals many students wrote about their desire to live up to parental expectations ...and it seemed as if they really meant it...as if it wasn't so much a sense of duty but more like a value...a sense of connection with their family...with its roots in something deeper than "because I have to."

But, of course, this isn't getting us any closer to understanding why three of my students copied their "free-writing" assignments. So how do I get there? Well, maybe by revisiting the differences in teaching style – and hence learning style – between the west and the east.

For instance, Hui, in "Communicative Language Teaching in China" (Yu, 2001) says that, in China "...teachers are viewed as knowledge holders. If teachers do not display their knowledge in lectures, or if they play games with students or ask students to role play in class, then they are not doing their job!" So maybe, the reason my students copied was because they think learning a language means learning to reproduce the language rather than produce it...so maybe they think that by copying they must be learning. Maybe.

Or maybe they are copying because they have not had an opportunity to learn that stream-of-consciousness writing is actually a valid learning tool. And maybe they don't really understand the activity itself because it seems so alien to them to learn by writing a bunch of garbage. Sure. Possibly.

Or maybe they copied because they thought they could get away with it; thought that because I played games with them that maybe I was a bit thick. And I think maybe this possibility rankles me most of all. Did they really think I wouldn't know the difference between someone who writes like this – "so we go the mall for shopping" – and someone who writes like this – "Pollution is reaching critical limits in modern industrial society".

But this is all noise really, because although I am generating a lot of thoughts about whys and wheretofors, I am not getting any closer to slamming this issue in a pigeon hole. I guess the only thing I can say at this point is that Chinese students are coming to my classroom with a range of motivations and preconceptions about learning that I have never really examined up close before. And that, if I really want to reach them then I'm going to have to make more of an effort to understand just where they're coming from - maybe even move myself and my teaching style along the spectrum from west to east in order to be able to be heard - in order to somehow convince them that copying from a book is not necessarily going to teach them to communicate in the language they've come here to learn.

References

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