

‘Shooting Yourself in the Foot’ or ‘On the Yellow Brick Road’? Chinese Students in an Intensive ESL program

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Introduction

This paper builds on a previous unpublished study that I carried out of the relationship between the students from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Canadian Academic English Language test (CAEL) and the Carleton University ESL Intensive Courses (IC). That paper focused on what seems to be a paradox – the positive washback effect of the CAEL on teachers but the negative washback effect on students. It was informed by previous studies of the washback phenomenon, in particular (Alderson & Wall 1993, Bailey, 1996, Messick, 1996 and Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996).

This project is ethnographic in nature (see Watson-Gegeo, 1988 and Flowerdew & Miller, 1995).

“The ethnographic perspective on language learning is one of language socialization rather than one of language acquisition.”
(p. 582 Watson-Gegeo)

The current study, rather than focusing on students’ language acquisition, will attempt to provide “a thick description ...of values, roles assumptions, attitudes and patterns of behavior” (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995) and to examine more closely some of the questions posed by the previous study.

Research Questions

1. Why does this paradox of positive washback in teachers but negative washback in students exist?
2. What can we do to both understand this rift better and to take actions that will either lessen or bridge the gap without compromising our principles?

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Secondary Research Questions

Some secondary questions that will, I hope, be at least partially answerable through an exploration of the data are:

3. What are the main differences between learning English in China and learning English in the Carleton IC program?
4. Given that the students are aware that there are major differences, do they understand why those differences exist and are they willing and able to adapt to our methods, or do they resist? In other words, why do some students, although they are aware of the cultural difference, seem to be “shooting themselves in the foot” by employing language learning strategies that are not appropriate to their present situation?
5. What can or what should teachers do in order to make explicit those differences and the reasons for them without compromising our own academic culture?
6. What are students’ reasons for learning English? In other words, are they instrumentally or integratively motivated?

Background

Students from the PRC are arriving in great numbers at universities in countries where English is a native language. (O’Halloran, 2000). Carleton University is no exception. Over 60% of the IC program during the Winter 2003 term consisted of students from the PRC. Most of these are planning to continue their university studies at Carleton or another Canadian university.

The original title of this paper was “Shooting Yourself in the Foot”, an idea that refers back to some of the conclusions drawn from my previous paper. It is a very Western metaphor for what seems to be a set of language learning strategies employed by many Chinese students that may have worked for them in China but that do not necessarily work here. Ballard (1996) has an excellent description on pages 160-161 of an Asian MA student employing strategies that are in conflict with the expectations of her Australian professor. This example illustrates the ‘shooting yourself in the foot’ phenomenon very well. The student takes great pains to study hard but only manages to harm rather than help herself in the academic culture of Australia. However, seeing this shooting oneself in the foot as an virtually inevitable part of the trip up the ‘Yellow Brick Road’ to the ‘Emerald City’ allows us to use another very Western metaphor to describe a very cross-cultural phenomenon.

This paper will attempt to shed light on the uneasy relationship between the PRC students, the CAEL (Canadian Academic English Language) Assessment, and the ESL Intensive Courses that the students are taking, by exploring students’ attitudes towards and expectations of what an

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

academic culture should be. It focuses on students' motivations for learning English and to a certain extent, teachers' motivations and attitudes towards teaching EFL in China.

Method

By building up another layer through thick description using ethnographic methods and triangulation following models established by Watson-Gegeo, 1988 and Flowerdew & Miller, 1995, I hope to be able to let ideas and possible answers emerge from the data collected from the following instruments, that were employed pedagogically as part of a thematic unit called "The Successful Student" and focusing on cultural adaptation, that I was engaged in teaching.

A questionnaire given to my (intermediate) IC20 class about their attitudes to and expectations from their ESL classes

This questionnaire was designed to explore students' reasons for being in the IC program, their motivations for being there, and their attitudes, beliefs and expectations about the CAEL Assessment and about learning English in an intensive but low-stakes classroom situation.

It was administered during class time as part of a 'Successful Student' topic and focused on academic cultural differences between their own countries and Canada. This questionnaire can be found in the appendices. All the students who came to class regularly were aware that I was using some of their work as data for a Master's degree "learning project". Only data from students who signed the ethics participants' form were used in this study. Data was compiled from the 12 students who had agreed to be participants. It is significant that all 5 students who did not sign the participant ethics form were Chinese. (Three were absent that day and two decided not to sign.) Does this mean that they were suspicious of my motives? Could it mean that they are not interested in the topic and that they are so instrumentally focused on passing the CAEL that they do not see any relevance in it? Could it mean that they do not want to help Canadian ESL teachers understand them better? Were the absent students studying for the CAEL? It would be interesting to explore this issue further by focusing a study on these students who do not participate in an exercise meant to help them adapt to their new academic culture. However such a study could prove to be impossible since these are the very same students who do not want to participate in studies of this nature and who do not come to class.

Two taped group discussions in the same class based on questions from the questionnaire

The first group discussion gave the students the opportunity to talk about their answers to the questionnaire in small groups and to share their feelings

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

and opinions with each other. The questions were the same as the ones on pages 2-4 in the questionnaire. Students divided themselves into three groups of 5 students. I focused on group “C” for this study because all of the students in this group had signed the participants’ ethics form.

The second group discussion gave students the chance to voice their opinions about some specific scenarios. The first three scenarios were proposed during teachers’ meetings as possible solutions to problems encountered because of the large number of Chinese students in the program and the fourth was a question asked in order to tap into students’ perceptions of the best way to study for the CAEL. I focused on a different group for this discussion in order to get as much data as possible for triangulation.

A class assignment called “Reading for Pleasure”

This assignment revealed some interesting truths about students’ motivations and ability to take control of their own learning. A copy of the assignment sheet is in the appendices.

An essay written by the class comparing and contrasting their English language learning experiences in China and in Carleton

This assignment revealed students’ own perceptions of the differences between the academic cultures in China and Canada and their awareness of the possible reasons for those differences.

A taped interview with two Canadian teachers who spent a year teaching in China

This interview presents the other side of the picture, Canadian teachers in China rather than Chinese students in Canada. I compared the information from this interview with the data collected from the students.

The questionnaire, essay prompt, topic overviews, and interview and discussion questions are included in the appendices.

The students and course aims

Out of 18 people in my class, 16 wanted to go on to full-time regular studies at Carleton. 15 of these were Chinese. Because of this, my main topic for the second half of the winter term became “The Successful Student”. (The topic overview is included in the appendices.) One aim of this topic was to make more explicit the differences in academic culture that exist between Canada and their own countries.

Another aim was to give students an arsenal of skills, tools and strategies to help them succeed in their future studies and to become more self-sufficient in their future English learning.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

A final aim was to give them a taste of Canadian university learning through playing a variety of taped lectures and by having three former students, now in regular studies, come to be guest speakers in my class.

Many of the students seemed obsessed with the CAEL Assessment, either staying home to 'study' for it the week before a test or by interrupting a lesson to ask very specific questions about the CAEL essay. "How many words should it be?" "What should be the topic sentence of the second paragraph?"... We talked about the CAEL a lot and I tried to make sure they understood its construct, that it was meant to test their ability to learn something new in English. In spite of this, and research evidence to the contrary, they persisted in believing that knowing the topic of the test in advance would be the best help they could have in succeeding at the CAEL.

The questionnaire, the discussions, the essay about their language learning experiences and the "Successful Student" topic were all meant to render the process of learning English in an English speaking country more transparent and help them adjust to our methodology and academic culture. In developing this topic I was inspired by the work of Ballard, 1996 Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, Kramsch, 1991, and Flowerdew & Miller, 1995.

Cross-cultural EAP learning

Ballard (1996), who teaches ESL in an Australian university, states of her students that:

"Too often their language learning has taken place in a vacuum, divorced from the intellectual context of their other studies.... Now they are required to move beyond this focus on language in its own right to using language as a tool and a medium for thinking."
(p. 148)

In a similar vein, Flowerdew contrasts "Confucian and Western values as they relate to academic lectures". He states that:

"Chinese students' attitudes towards teaching and learning differ from those of Western students and can cause problems for Western teachers who are unfamiliar in teaching such students." (p. 349)

Cortazzi & Jin (1996) explain particularly well that concepts taken for granted in one culture may not be in another.

"By the term 'culture of learning' we mean that much behavior in language classrooms is set within taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about what constitutes good learning, about how to teach or learn, whether and how to ask

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

questions, what textbooks are for, and how language teaching relates to broader issues of the nature and purpose of education. In many classrooms both teachers and learners are unaware that such a culture of learning may be influencing the process of teaching and learning. A culture of learning is thus part of the hidden curriculum. In many language classrooms, the teacher and the students have a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, so that there may be more than one culture of learning which influences participants. Therefore it is possible that there may be largely unnoticed gaps between the expectations of the teacher and students, or between different groups of students.” (p. 169)

This study tries to explore those ‘gaps’ and to lay bare some of the beliefs, attitudes, expectations and concepts that lie below the surface of the typical language classroom.

Themes emerging from the data

Two major themes emerged from the data collected. The first can be framed in terms of several types of dichotomies which in turn lead to a set of paradoxes. The second suggests a continuum incorporating the different stages of pedagogical shock.

I will present the main dichotomies that I found significant for this study in a series of charts. In themselves, these contrasts are not as interesting as the predicaments of our students, who must live within the gaps or paradoxes created by these dichotomies, and, as a result, sometimes find themselves impaled upon the horns of painful dilemmas.

First Dichotomy - EFL versus ESL teaching methodologies

Attitudes, beliefs, expectations and thought patterns underlying the familiar surface structure of classroom learning cannot be taken for granted (Ballard, 1996; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). It is clear from a reading of Yuhui Yang’s paper (this volume) that learning English in China and learning English in the Carleton Intensive ESL program are very different. It is also clear that the academic cultures in China and Canada are very different. Attitudes, beliefs, expectations and thought patterns underlying the familiar surface structure of classroom learning cannot be taken for granted. Ballard, also using a chart to illustrate these differences makes this point very well. So do Flowerdew and Miller in their paper about culture and L2 university lectures. Figure 1. shows some of those differences.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

EFL in China	ESL at Carleton
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textbook-driven and highly controlled stage-by-stage learning. “package-deal” approach. • Large classes • All Chinese students • Chinese L2 teachers • Teacher-fronted, teacher-driven. Teacher takes responsibility for getting students through the exams. • Extensive, high-stakes testing at all stages • Culminates in a very high-stakes test • A small part of a rigorous and competitive education system • No time for leisure activities • Life is “two dots and a line, home and school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No textbook, communicative approach, no apparent stage-by-stage control. No clear “package.” • Small classes • Multinational student body • A variety of L1 and L2 teachers • Student-centred, student-driven. Students take responsibility for their own learning. • No testing, or very low-stakes evaluation • The high-stakes CAEL test is not part of the IC program • English is their full-time occupation • Time for leisure activities and a social life • Life radiates outward from a focal point at school.

Figure 1. Chinese EFL versus Canadian ESL methodologies.

Information in the table above is taken from personal communication with Yuhui Yang, from my own experience teaching at Carleton, from my students’ accounts, and from references. And information from all my data gathering tools confirms this contrast in teaching methodologies, especially from the language learning essay and from the teacher interview. Here are some of my students’ comments from their essays.

Here English is just a language that we will use to study other majors and to do anything I English. But in my country, English is an important subject. We only need to know how to write the test and get good credit.

*We have a textbook. All of students in China study English use the same book... We need to study 72 texts every term. And we can know what we will study on next class.
I must do lots of exercises for exam. I felt so boring when I did exercises because I don’t like the system. The students didn’t learn*

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

English very well, just be easy to take test. Sometimes I felt I look like “Robot” and I was mute when I open my mouth.

After I come to Canada English study is not as easy as I thought. I have more free time. I wonder to study but it doesn't work.

It is clear to me from these examples that these students appreciate the differences in our two cultures and can write articulately about them. They are in transition between the two. They are beginning to understand that they will have to work in different ways in order to succeed in their studies here. Some seem to be stuck in what I call ‘the package deal’ approach to language learning. They want a ‘package’, a textbook containing all the English they need for a certain ‘level’. If they can memorize and regurgitate that successfully, then they can go on to the next level. Without this kind of control, they feel lost, unable either to take responsibility for their own learning or to measure their progress. This means that those who are still in this mind-set will continue to ‘shoot themselves in the foot’ in their learning strategies until they can make a paradigm shift and begin to see English not as another linear subject like calculus or algebra, but as a medium of communication complicated by all the cultural and historical baggage that any language carries.

Similarly, data from my interviews with the two Canadian teachers who had taught in China shows that teachers too were able to pinpoint the differences between the two systems and that they were also caught on the horns of a dilemma – whether, and how much to adapt their teaching to the Chinese way.

One teacher taught teaching methodology to Chinese English teachers at a well-known Chinese Institute of Technology. He had 24-25 students, all females except for one, from kindergarten teachers to university teachers. He said that they loved learning to teach and apply Western style teaching.

But it couldn't go anywhere because the system is not in place for it. So it petered out. It died eventually, especially in the elementary and secondary schools. It just could not be enhanced and developed... They don't have that flexibility of small numbers.”

This indicates a keen interest in China for Western teaching methods but suggests that, for practical reasons, Western methods cannot be easily implemented. The context is too different.

The other teacher had this to say about watching her Chinese counterparts teach.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

I didn't see [these professors] teach, "didn't see any of them in action but the doors to their classrooms were often open and all I saw wherever I went in this huge university was a professor at a lectern talking. Dull voice, dull (?) but [the students] are there. They go. They expect it to be like that and they're almost disappointed when it's not. When you go in there and you say "I'm going to try something different today" ... "AAHHHHH Don't!" "If you've got them used to something, then they want to continue that way." "I would walk by the classrooms and think "how boring. How absolutely boring." ...

Our Chinese students here at Carleton might possibly turn this experience on its head and think "How confusing! How absolutely confusing!"

Second Dichotomy - Teaching and Learning Strategies in China and Canada
Ballard argues that the Chinese approach to knowledge at the undergraduate level leans more in the direction of a "conserving" or "reproductive" approach while the Canadian attitude leans more towards the "analytic" or "extending" approach. Of course this is a continuum rather than a clear dichotomy. The figure below is adapted from one on page 151 called "the influence of cultural attitudes to knowledge on teaching and learning strategies. (Ballard and Clanchy 1991a: 13).

Chinese undergraduate learning	Canadian undergraduate learning
<p>Teaching strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher is virtually the exclusive source of knowledge, direction and guidance • Teacher transmits information, demonstrates skill, and is responsible for moral and social training • Teacher tests memory recall and demonstration of skills. The emphasis is on replication and ranking • Teacher transfers knowledge and skills 	<p>Teaching strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher is a co-ordinator of learning resources, a questioner, a critical guide, a gadfly • Teachers takes an interpretive approach to analysis of information • Teacher models a critical approach to knowledge and conventions • Assessment requires critical analysis and problem-solving, originality and interpretation • Teacher fosters independent and critical thinking styles and the capacity for theory and abstraction

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Learning strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Memorization and imitation• Summarizing, describing, identifying and applying formulae and information• Emphasis on “what?” questions• Emphasis on ‘correctness’	Learning strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analytical and critical thinking• Questioning, judging and recombining ideas and information into an argument• Emphasis on “why, how. How valid, how important?” questions• Emphasis on originality and reshaping material into a different pattern
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Figure 2: Ballard (1996)

Again, my own findings add weight to this dichotomy. The answers to question #3 from my student questionnaire and from their language learning essay reveal that the students are aware of some of the differences and want to make the change now that they are in an ESL environment.

Question #3 was: *If there is no textbook and no exam, what is the best way to learn English in the Intensive ESL program?* This question was designed to explore students’ reaction to our methodology. Most students come to the program having learned English from textbooks in a highly structured and controlled way. (See Yuhui Yang’s paper in this volume for more insights on this subject.) What do they think of our methods? Can they see a pattern, a progression? Or does it seem like a confusing, jumble of unrelated, meaningless tasks?

Most students indicated that they were aware of the many good language learning strategies at their disposal.

Practice. Speaking in English, writing in English, listening English and thinking in English, make the English as part of your body. Language is a kind of communicating tools. Do more practice is the best way to learn any one of them.

Looking for some native speaker and then often talk with them, and try to write many essay, report and reading journals. Talking with classmates in English about anything. Watching TV and try to understand what did they said. Read the newspaper and kinds of books in English.

Read lots of books! We can make a plan for students. Every day we need to read how many pages in one book. And write somethings which you like every day.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Can read some book for reading English. Talking with another people to improve speaking and listening. Writing different topic for learn how to write in English.

One student wrote:

I would like to do more listening, get some information about CAEL test because I know nothing about that. I know it difficult. I wonder know what's the test like and what the topics etc.

The latter is a good example of many students' obsession with the CAEL. Although many students write convincingly about good language learning strategies, as in the examples above, in most cases they do not appear to use them. They continue to speak Chinese in class and focus their reading on anything they think will help them pass the CAEL. Here is the paradox.

Similarly, their language learning essays also show an awareness and appreciation of the differences between the two systems even if, as the previous quotations show, they were not yet ready to act on this knowledge.

Third Dichotomy - Confucian versus Western Values

In the student questionnaire, answers to the questions dealing with classroom practices reflect Confucian values.

Confucian	Western
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respect for authority of lecturer• Lecturer should not be questioned• Student motivated by family and pressure to excel• Positive value placed on effacement and silence• Emphasis on group orientation to learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lecturer valued as a guide and facilitator• Lecturer is open to challenge• Student motivated by desire for individual development• Positive value placed on self-expression of ideas• Emphasis on individual development and creativity in learning

In the student questionnaire, the answers to the questions dealing with classroom practices reflect Confucian values. Here are some answers to question #1, which asked: *If you have a question about the lesson, do you prefer to ask the teacher during class, or during the break / after class? Give reasons for your answer.*

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Some answers from my students indicated similar beliefs to the ones held by the students in China in Cortazzi and Jin’s study (1996).

Sometimes I will ask teacher, but most time I ask my classmates, they all explain to me in Chinese. I want to ask teacher but I don’t know how to ask in English.

If the question is our group’s question, I will ask teacher during class. If this question is my own question, I prefer during the break or after class.

I prefer to ask the teacher after class. I don’t want to affect the whole classmate. During the break, I need a break, the teacher need too.

If it is a common question, I’ll ask teacher during the class, because everybody want to know it. If it is a personal question, I prefer to ask the teacher during the break or after class. Because other classmate maybe think you waste the time if you ask it during the class.

Fourth Dichotomy – Methods of Evaluation in China and Canada

The contrast in methods of evaluation between Chinese and Canadian English teaching was very marked. The Canadian system comprising both the Intensive Course evaluation and the CAEL test proved difficult for many of our students to adapt to. The CAEL is a huge issue with all the Chinese students and it is vital that they pass it in order to continue with their studies. It became clear from their group discussions that they were able to grasp the reasons for the difference between the Chinese testing system and the Carleton one, and the necessity for being well-grounded in academic English before embarking upon their regular courses, but at the same time they knew that they would save their parents a lot of money and themselves a lot of time if they could pass the CAEL as soon as possible.

EFL evaluation in China	ESL evaluation in Carleton Intensive ESL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous evaluation throughout all their school years from kindergarten to university • Great importance placed on marks. Very high-stakes • “level” of English proficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic “ball-park” type marking system • very low-stakes. IC course mark does not get them through the CAEL test. • Difficult to determine your “level” from your IC mark.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

<p>depends on school marks rather than the ability to communicate effectively in the target language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• success on tests depends on ability to memorize and reproduce	<p>Evaluation reflects student's effort and ability to use effective language learning strategies rather than their memorization of the "package."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The CAEL test is high-stakes but success depends on overall AEP proficiency within a Western context and not memorization and reproduction.
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Figure 4: Methods of evaluation based on Yuhui Yang's paper and my own experience at Carleton.

Students were very clear about how testing was used in China and about how they were expected to study and progress as can be seen from these statements from the language learning essay.

It's most important thing in my country is we often have exams. It can easy know how about your English and you can know which level are you in... but in Canada you not have a test sometimes, maybe only once, so you don't know how about your English.

The teaching methods were mostly of grammar. We have exam every week. At the end of term we have a mainly exam! This exam is very important for every students. Because the exam record mean you study hard or not in this term!

We have a textbook. All of students in China study English use the same book... We need to study 72 texts every term. And we can know what we will study on next class.

There are many exam include English. In China people are always judged by their score. So the purpose of most students for studying is test. But it's not fair, how can you judge a person just only by a piece of paper... Most Chinese students are good at exams.

Contrast the above statements about tests in China to the ones below about testing practice in Carleton.

After I come to Canada English study is not as easy as I thought. I have more free time. I wonder to study but it doesn't work.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

If you want to pass the CAEL, you have to study by yourself. I mean that study English in Canada is for use, and study English in China is for exam.

The following is an extract from the transcript of one of the group discussions. It focuses on the CAEL and shows that the students are confused about its construct. They are not sure how to study for it.

I think the CAEL test a little bit unfair for the international students. My friend told me that real Canadian cannot finish the test all of the times. So I think for the international students maybe the test too hard.,

Some CAEL test article is sometimes very hard.

If more than 50% of Canadians can finish this test is good, but I don't think so. Many, many Canadian cannot finish the test. So I don't think...

We can change the test for CAEL. We can use another test. It's a good way for international students because we can't do this because the CAEL is too hard. You may fail it. It's very, very hard.

The teacher told us that if you get a full score in the CAEL test then you will be a professor.

Yeah but this is not for Canadian students. It's only for international students who take the Intensive course...

Fifth Dichotomy – Motivations: Chinese Students vs. Carleton Teachers
Information for this dichotomy came not only from the references but also from the student questionnaire, the reading journal assignment and from a teachers' questionnaire from last term. Many students state quite bluntly that they are here because their parents want them to study international business or computer science so that they can get a good job back in China and help support their parents in their old age. Often the students will also say that they are not really interested in the major chosen for them by their parents. Their interest in their studies here is extrinsically motivated. Particularly their English studies are seen as a necessary evil at best, and as a huge time and money waster at worst.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Students' motivations and goals	Teachers' motivations and goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly don't want to be in the IC program. They are there because they did not pass the CAEL. • Want to pass the CAEL as soon as possible so they can begin their degree programs • Extrinsic, instrumental motivations comes from parents and the promise of a good job and success in their future careers • Don't understand the value of an intensive, 25-hour-a-week ESL program for their success in university • See university education as a necessary step on the way to a good job and bright future • Expect Canadian tertiary education to be similar to Chinese tertiary education. (See figures 2 & 3.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect students to want to be there and to recognize the value of the program as an effective method for improving their English. • Do not want to "teach to the test" in the way the students want (ie. A magic formula for passing) • Try to encourage students to be intrinsically and integratively motivated. • Understand that the CAEL grew out of our teaching methodology and that we do "teach to the test" although not in a way easily recognizable to students. • See university education as a means of developing and broadening critical thinking and extending knowledge and not as only a means to getting a good job. • Students should come to university because they want to develop their interests and not because their parents want them to.

Figure 5: Motivation

The above table suggests that students' reasons for coming to the Carleton ESL IC program may be in conflict with their teachers' expectations of what their reasons should be.

On the first page of the questionnaire were 2 questions about motivation and attitudes. The answers to questions 7 and 8 were:

Question 7. (Check the one that is most true for you.)

I am learning English because:

- *I have to (3)*
- *I want to (7)*

Question 8. (Check the one that is most true for you.)

My goal is:

- *to improve my English (0)*
- *to pass the CAEL (1)*
- *to go to a Canadian university (7)*
- *to get a good / better job (1)*
- *to experience a different culture (0)*
- *to finish this term and go home (0)*
- *to use English for traveling (1)*
- *to emigrate to an English-speaking country (0)*

Notice that no one chose “to improve my English” as their main goal, yet 7 checked “because I want to” as their motivation for learning English rather than “I have to”. The same number chose “to go to a Canadian university” as their main goal as chose “because I want to” learn English. There appears to be a contradiction here. I would have expected “to improve my English” to be a more important goal for people who are studying English because they “want to”, and for those whose main goal seems to be “to go to a Canadian university”, I would have expected “because I have to” to be a more natural choice. Perhaps there are cultural differences between these students and their teachers related to desires and obligations.

The reading journal assignment was inspired by Stephen Krashen’s (1993) book *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. According to this research academic success as well as language learning success is greatly enhanced by extensive reading for one’s own pleasure. Indeed, Krashen goes as far as to say that reading for pleasure is the only way to succeed academically. I wanted to encourage my students to read for pleasure. Each week they were to choose something to read and write a short summary of it together with their opinion of their choice.

When I look back on this assignment, I have to conclude that Chinese students do not read for pleasure. Several did not take the assignment seriously and did no reading journals at all. Others, as noted by Mike Barker in his reflection (in this volume), hurriedly copied something from the internet at the last minute. The remainder, those who did try to do the assignment well, largely chose book about learning English – grammar or vocabulary texts, or CAEL practice readings. Only one or two people chose books or general-interest magazines. As well, many students seemed incapable of stating their sources. I had asked for title, author, chapter number for books, and title, author and periodical title for magazines, something that seemed to me a simple enough request. Yet many students forgot to include these every time even though I explained the importance of

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

knowing the context from which a reading came many times throughout the course.

As Yuhui Yang states in her paper in this volume, Chinese students have no time for any life outside of school. They are not used to leisure time. When I ask them about their hobbies, many of them say that “sleeping” is their hobby. They are not used to the luxury of being able to read purely for their own pleasure. If Krashen is right that reading for pleasure is the only way to succeed in academia, then these students have been handicapped by the exigencies of their education system. The motivation is entirely from the outside – from teachers and from exams. Again, there is a serious disjunct between the culture they come from and the one they have entered.

Some Conclusions Concerning these Dichotomies

The above charts highlight conflicts and contrasts between Chinese students and Western academia. They explore some of the problems encountered by both students and teachers in the IC ESL program at Carleton. I do not want, however, to stop at what Kramsch (1991) calls “dubious dichotomies”.

I would rather like to refine this idea by taking these contrasts and placing them at opposite ends of a continuum. In giving names to these stages along the continuum, I would like to take a ‘tongue-in-cheek’ approach and borrow images from Frank L. Baum’s famous children’s story *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). In that tale, the young heroine Dorothy finds herself in a very different culture from her own. She must travel down the Yellow Brick Road from bewilderment and helplessness to understanding and control. Like her, these students are faced with extraordinary challenges and reasons for ‘shooting yourself in the foot’ at certain points on the path.

- They have impossible demands from both parents and teachers.
- They loyalties are divided between two cultures.
- They are beginning to understand the new culture but cannot act upon it
- They are young and unused to making your own decisions.
- They are homesick.

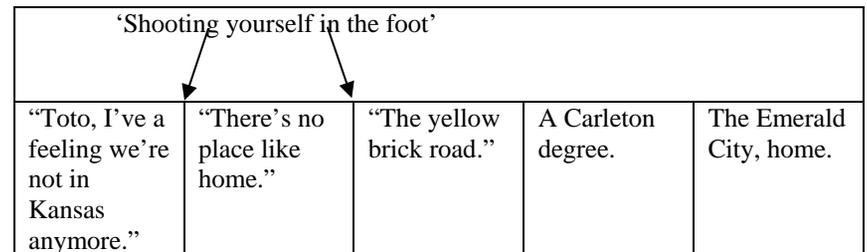


Figure 6: The Yellow Brick Road and ‘Shooting Yourself in the Foot’

Pedagogical shock: The Land of OZ and the Yellow Brick Road

Culture shock is seen as progressing through a series of stages; pedagogical shock, a term coined by Adrienne Soucy and Andi Gray (1999) is the academic equivalent of culture shock. It can be seen as a continuum of adjustment to the Canadian classroom, with the home academic culture at one end and the target culture at the other. Students' attitudes, beliefs and expectations vary according to how long they have been in the target culture, how motivated they are to succeed in it and how perceptive they are about academic cultural differences and the reasons for those differences.

- *Stage 1. "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."*

This is the first stage of pedagogical shock, the honeymoon stage. All students new to the system experience this stage. It is the initial encounter with the new classroom and the awareness that all here is recognizable as a classroom learning situation but very different from home. The responses to the language learning essay prompt confirm that students are well aware of these differences and some of the reasons for them. What they do next after the initial shock of the new depends on their motivation, attitudes, personality and tolerance for ambiguity.

- *Stage 2. "There's no place like home"*

Some but not all students go through this homesickness stage and some remain stuck in the home culture, trying to recreate it for themselves in the new culture. This can be seen in our Chinese students who share apartments with each other, speak Chinese in class, think they can pass the CAEL by memorizing CAEL essays written by friends who have passed, and who skip classes to "study for the CAEL". These students still have "the package deal" approach to English studies. They see English as another subject like calculus. Our Chinese students are unlucky in that it is easy for them to get stuck in this stage because there are so many of them. However, not all students seem to go through this stage.

Many of the more mature, more adaptable students are able to change their expectations more easily, either because they have a high tolerance of ambiguity or because they are academically experienced or well-traveled enough to be able to have a broader perspective on a new culture.

- *Stage 3: The Yellow Brick Road*

Students who have managed to turn their backs on home and look forward along the Yellow Brick Road towards the ultimate goal, The Emerald City of total comfort and ease within the Canadian academic system, embark upon an interesting and difficult journey. Different students, depending upon their

resilience and adaptability will progress either slowly or quickly, skipping stages or reverting in moments of despair or self-doubt to earlier stages.

Most of our Chinese students seem to be at various stages along the Yellow Brick Road. I would like to focus on what I call the “shooting yourself in the foot” phenomenon that occurs at various points along the Road.

‘Shooting Yourself in the Foot’

People who shoot themselves in the foot are damaging their own chances of success. They either do it willfully or unconsciously. During the shooting yourself in the foot stage students are aware of at least some, if not all the adaptations they will have to make in order to succeed in Canadian academia. They can “talk the talk” but not yet “walk the talk”. They are ready to make the leap away from their own culture and test the new cultural waters but are constrained either by their own reticence, by peer pressure or by pragmatic necessities like money and time. Also they are handicapped by sheer critical mass. Students from countries other than China are not so handicapped. They have many more opportunities to mingle with people who do not speak their language or share their culture.

Evidence from the data collected both here and in my previous study of the CAEL suggests that many intermediate level Chinese students are shooting themselves in the foot. They understand that their new academic culture is different and they are able to articulate the superficial reasons for this – ESL versus EFL environment, Western versus Asian culture – but their understanding does not yet go deep enough to enable them to see below the surface or to act upon the growing awareness they are developing. They are caught between the desires of their teachers and their parents. They have a foot in each culture and must learn to balance the pressures coming from each. This is a very difficult position to be in for young high school graduates coming from a culture that has high respect for both parents and teachers.

Their parents are pressuring them to pass the CAEL and to finish their degrees as quickly as possible and to return home. Parents have invested a lot of money and hope in their only children and have sent them into a culture they themselves do not understand clearly. The demands they are making on their children may be unrealistic and unfair. The children are homesick; their parents miss them. Sacrifices and suffering on both sides can be great. Failure carries a huge loss of face.

Teachers, on the other hand, are encouraging these same students to take a Western attitude towards their learning and to be more integrative in their motivations. Attaining the Emerald City would mean academic success but it could also mean a suspension of loyalty to their home culture for the duration of their stay here. It is hard for Western teachers, brought up as we

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

have been to question authority and rebel against it, to understand where these students are coming from and to respect their position.

In his article about critical classroom discourse analysis, Kumaravadivelu (1999) deals explicitly with these issues of culture, power and authority. He asks a series of questions which all teachers of Asian students should try to address. Here are ones I found to be the most apt.

If the learners' voices have to be recognized and respected, how might their personal purposes, attitudes and preferred ways of doing things be reconciled with classroom rules and regulations and with instructional aims and objectives?

If students bring to the classroom their own forms of cultural capital, ...how can we make sure that their cultural capital is recognized, rewarded and enriched?

If negotiation of discourse meaning is not confined to the acquisitional aspects of input and interaction but includes the expectations and beliefs, identities and voices, and fears and anxieties of the participants, how might such a comprehensive analysis help or hinder the proper conduct of classroom business?

If classroom discourse lends itself to multiple perspectives depending on the discourse participants' preconceived notions of learning, teaching, and learning outcomes, how can we identify and understand possible mismatches between intentions and interpretations of classroom aims and events?
(Kumaravadivelu, 1999: 478)

Final Conclusions

Does the data collected here help to answer my initial research questions as well as those asked by Kumaravadivelu? Let us revisit them.

1. *Why does this paradox of positive washback in teachers but negative washback in students exist?*

The contrasts revealed in the 5 charts between systems of education and academic expectations between China and Canada go a long way to explaining the paradox here. There is a misunderstanding of the construct of the CAEL test among students brought up in a system wherein testing played a very different role. Also, time and financial constraints put unhealthy pressure on students to attempt to improve their English too quickly. Their

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

unsuccessful strategies are part of their attempt to meet unrealistic and conflicting goals.

2. *What can we do both to understand this rift better and to take actions that will either lessen or bridge the gap without compromising our principles?*

We can try to understand better where these students are coming from – their educational history and norms within that system, the pressures on them from their parents, and their own maturity and awareness of differences between China and Canada. Then we must make difficult decisions about whether, or how much we should try to adapt to their needs. Cortazzi & Jin recommend a kind of “cultural synergy” (p. 201), a concept derived from accommodation theory. The data here point to some extreme differences between our two education systems. Because of that and because these students and their parents have invested so much in deciding to do their degrees here, I would be inclined to agree. Accommodation rather than acculturation would be the most helpful and least damaging approach to take.

The secondary research questions are more focused on specific details.

3. *What are the main differences between learning English in China and learning English in the Carleton IC program?*

An examination of Yuhui Yang’s paper in this volume and of IC ESL courses at Carleton make the differences very clear. They are summarized in figure 1 above.

4. *Given that the students are aware that there are major differences, do they understand why those differences exist and are they willing and able to adapt to our methods, or do they resist? In other words, why do some students, although they are aware of the cultural difference, seem to “shoot themselves in the foot” by employing language learning strategies that are not appropriate to their present situation?*

Because they have a foot in both camps and because of the many differences in education system, in attitudes towards education and in differences in motivation for being here, Chinese high school graduates are often placed in an impossible situation. They are pulled in one direction by family and home culture and in another by teachers and the new culture. They try their best to please both. This often involves compromising their ultimate goal - learning English well enough to succeed easily in their university studies – to the more urgent short-term goal of getting through the CAEL test. For most

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

at the 20 level, this goal is impossible to attain. People who are expected to succeed in the impossible will often shoot themselves in the foot either by accident because they are under great stress or on purpose because it seems like the only way out.

5. *What can or what should teachers do in order to make explicit those differences and the reasons for them without compromising our own academic culture?*

Teachers can do their best to alert these students to the traps and pitfalls and conflicts of their situation. They can develop teaching units which highlight those differences and suggest strategies for success in the new system. They can try to make their own teaching style more like the Chinese one by structuring lessons in ways recognizable to Chinese students. For example, they can take pains to let students know what they should prepare for the next lesson. They can use testing to a greater extent. They can explain their reasons for teaching the way they do. Teachers within the Carleton IC ESL program already do these things. Sometimes it is simply a matter of time. Students need time to adjust to a system so different from their own. As well, they are not only making the leap from China to Canada; they are also making the leap from high school to university.

6. *What are students' reasons for learning English? In other words, are they instrumentally or integratively motivated?*

Many of our Chinese students are instrumentally motivated. There is no research that indicates that this kind of motivation will guarantee failure. It can indeed be very effective. However, it can clash with Western views that motivation for entering university should be in integrative and intrinsic. Many of our Chinese students are enrolled in either computer science or business studies, not because they want to be there, but because their parents want them to be there. Those are the fields where the best jobs will be. If students are not interested in their major, will they succeed? This would be an interesting question to explore in further research.

Caveats and Further Questions

Although delving into this kind of research yields fruitful results, I would like to mention two caveats. The first is that there is always the problem of bias. In sifting through the data, what leaps out as being significant is often what you wanted to find. In other words, great care must be taken to pay attention to everything, to not discard information that may run contrary to one's own bias. The very data that seems to go against the grain might prove to be the most significant in the end.

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

The other caveat is to ensure that there is no conflict of interest if one is trying to be both teacher and researcher at the same time. Did my class consider this type of in-class research a waste of their time or not? Certainly in my perspective, building this research around a theme about adapting to a new academic culture was helpful. However, I have to also take into account their views and ideas of the classroom activities we did as part of the theme, already a complex task for the cross-cultural reasons discussed in detail in this paper.

In future research, it would be interesting to track the students who stay away from classes to “study for the CAEL”. Is this strategy, so frustrating to their teachers, any more or any less effective than the strategy of coming to class every day? Also of interest would be to explore students’ apparently faulty assumption that knowing the CAEL topic in advance would help them to pass it. Perhaps they are right. Is the CAEL topic-sensitive? Tracking students who take the CAEL many times and always fail it, would also be of interest. What happens to them when they return home? A study of students who go through university pursuing a major recommended by their parent rather than following one that they have chosen for themselves would shed light on whether extrinsic motivation leads to the same kind of success or failure as intrinsic motivation.

Whether any of these topics would be practical or even possible remains to be seen. Whatever future research is done in the future within this program, the needs of the students must come before the needs of the researchers.

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CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Questionnaire (Louise Smith)

Answer the following questions according to your own learning experience. Do not answer how you think you should be, or what other people do. Answer what you are doing. There are no simple 'right' or 'wrong' answers to these questions. All the data collected will be used for a research on language styles and strategies and it would be helpful for improving ESL programs. If you have any questions, let the teacher know.

Gender: male () female ()

Age: 15-20 (), 21-25 (), 26-30 (), 31-35 (), 36-40 ()

Years of learning English in your countries: ()

Years of learning English in Canada: ()

If you have learned English in other English speaking countries, how long did you learn? ()

Part A: Language Learning Style

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|----|
| 1. | I learn more by reading textbooks than by listening to lectures. | yes | no |
| 2. | I prefer learning by myself to learning through instruction. | yes | no |
| 3. | I feel confident in my ability to succeed in learning English. | yes | no |
| 4. | I like to analyze the many details of language and understand exactly what is said or written. | yes | no |
| 5. | I like to learn through activities. | yes | no |
| 6. | I try to speak in English without worrying about making mistakes. | yes | no |
| 7. | I feel free to guess meanings when I do not know words or sentences. | yes | no |
| 8. | I try to find a better way for my learning English. | yes | no |
| 9. | In class, I learn more when I work with others. | yes | no |
| 10. | When I have an assignment, I plan how to do it before starting. | yes | no |
| 11. | Review your answers again. Do you think your language learning style has changed to some extent since you have studied in Canada? How has it changed? | yes | no |

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

Part B: Language Learning Strategies

1- very often, 2- often, 3- sometimes, 4 – rarely, 5 – never or almost never

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I use new words in a sentence so I can remember them. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | I keep vocabulary lists for review later. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | I say or write new English words several times to master them. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | I try to talk like native English speakers. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | I watch TV in English or go to movies in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. | I read English newspapers, books, or magazines to learn new words and structures. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. | I write notes, messages, letters (e-mails), or report in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. | I look up all the unknown words first and then read a text. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. | I first skim (read over quickly) an English passage, then go back and read carefully. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. | I guess the meaning of new words from the rest of the sentence or context. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. | When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures or find other ways. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. | I practice English pronunciation. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. | I look for people I can talk with in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. | I pay attention when someone is speaking English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. | I try to find out how to be a better learner of English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. | I think about my progress in learning English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. | I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. | I talk to someone else about how I feel about learning English in Canada. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. | If I do not understand, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

CARLETON PAPERS IN APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20. | I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 21. | I often speak to myself in English, either silently or aloud. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 22. | I try to memorize sentences without analyzing them by grammar rules. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 23. | I think in English while working or studying in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 24. | When my teacher asks questions in class, I try to answer them in my head silently. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Part C:

Answer the following questions. You don't need to worry about mistakes. You can write in incomplete sentences.

1. Think of how you studied English in your country. If you had relatively successful experiences, what were your successful learning strategies (techniques)?
2. Which strategies you used in your country are unhelpful now?
3. Many language learners talk about difficulties about their English learning. They say they feel discouraged, frustrated, impatient, helpless, or shy when they use the language. If you had some of these feelings in the past, but no longer have them, what did you do to overcome these feelings?
4. Have you developed some specific techniques to help with your learning English? What are they? Are they helpful for your learning? In what way?
5. Do you prepare for the CAEL test in a different way you study English in general? What is it?

Thank you for your cooperation!