

The Influence of Chinese Culture on Trainees' Online Behaviours in a Teacher Training Course

Zehang Chen

Beijing Normal University
zehangchen@yahoo.com.cn

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Chinese learners' online behaviours in a teacher training course which was developed as part of a Chinese and UK government funded collaborative project from 2003 to 2005 by the University of Nottingham, UK and Beijing Normal University, China. The aim of the project is to develop innovative eLearning materials for Chinese teachers of English. The paper focuses on the influence of Chinese culture on learners behaviors, leading to the conclusion that culture influence is an important issue that should be taken into consideration by online course developers

Keywords

face, harmony, authority, cooperation

INTRODUCTION

At present, in the formal education sector of China, there are about 130 million primary school students, 62 million junior high school students and 12 million senior high school students. There are about 470,000 teachers of English involved in the teaching of English at the secondary level in the whole country. In September 2001, English became a recognized course in the primary school curriculum from grade 3, required by the Ministry of Education (MoE). It is hard to estimate how many more English teachers are needed for primary schools. With the issue of a new national curriculum of English, the MoE expects educational departments at all levels resolutely to take effective measures in training and helping English teachers to be better able to cope with the new requirement. Different kinds of teacher training are being offered by different groups of people using different modes. Since the 1990s, an advanced distance learning mode, based on information and internet technologies, has been playing a more and more important role. "As part of its drive to expand higher education to the benefit of its entire population, in recent years the government has engaged in various measures to boost Web-based education, primarily because it is viewed as a major component in the construction of nationwide open education network and lifelong learning system (MoE, 1999, cited in Zhang, etc, 2002). There are now 68 key universities running Web-based degree-bearing educational programs nation wide.

The *eChina~UK* programme is one of the few set of projects aiming to produce online courses for Chinese learners through the collaboration of Sino-British academics and technologists. Just as Katchen (1989:81) says "whenever two cultures interact, there is always the potential for misunderstanding". If such misunderstanding is carried into the courses, it might cause problems for users and as a result the courses will not produce desirable learning effects. Web-based teacher education opens up a new window for us and yet it will not function well if it does not consider cultural issues. Since teachers are the target learners of Web-based teacher education, there is a need to understand their culture and thoughts so that suitable eLearning materials and environments can be designed and delivered successfully and effectively.

CHINESE CULTURE AND EDUCATION

Every country has its unique culture. Thousands of years of history has cultivated a unique Chinese culture and it influences education in many ways. The literature suggests that the following four factors have influenced Chinese education:

Face

Face is extremely important in Chinese culture. People tend to maintain their face, in other words, they want to leave others with very good impressions of themselves. Meanwhile, maintaining the face of others is equally vital. Hwang summarizes some common strategies of saving face for others: "avoiding criticizing anyone, especially superiors, in public; using circumlocution and equivocation in any criticism of another's performance; according greater social rewards to those skilled at preserving face for others" (Hwang, 1987:962).

Such behaviours are still quite common in today's society. If people feel they have lost face, they suffer a loss of their self-esteem. They feel shameful and will probably give up their effort on the things they have been doing. As a result, many people choose not to comment on others' ideas or else they comment very tactically.

This has certainly influenced education in schools. Many students are afraid of losing face, so they would not say anything unless they are absolutely sure it is correct (Tarone & Yule, 1989; Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Teachers sometimes put special effort into protecting students' face. Normally, they would not ask those who lower their heads and avoid eye contact with the teacher after a question was raised, because they know these students do not know the answer and would not want to lose face in public. Many teachers are worried that if they make their students lose face in class, the students might hate them and stop working hard on their subject. Therefore, they try to use other ways to help the weak students, such as offering extra tutorials after school or making them answer relatively easier questions so that they can have a sense of achievement. The subtleness in keeping face for the students and helping them to develop at the same time is a big challenge for Chinese teachers. Cheng (2000) argues that unsuitable methodologies adopted by teachers can also lead to a quiet classroom. However, if suitable methodologies in a Chinese context means creating a relaxing environment for students to talk freely, how to protect students' self-esteem so that they can enjoy the learning environment is still an issue to consider.

Authority

In Chinese, there is a well known saying "Even if you were just a teacher of me for one day, I would treat you like my father/mother for the rest of my life." This saying illustrates explicitly how important a teacher is to a Chinese. Teachers are always highly respected in Chinese history and parents believed in the past "strict teachers can create excellent students". Almost from the time when teachers first appeared, the relationship between teachers and learners has been hierarchical. The absolute authority of teachers makes students believe that teachers know everything and that teachers are always correct (Murphy, 1987, in Flowerdew, 1998). "Traditionally, the Chinese teacher is viewed as a respected figure with all wisdom" (Chan, in Watkins & Biggs, 2001:183), therefore, teachers are "reluctant to admit any inadequacies on his/her part. It is very difficult for a Chinese teacher to say "I am sorry. I don't know. Let's work out a solution together" (Ho & Crookall, 1995:237). From the students' point of view, they are normally expected to respect their teachers and maintain teachers' face by not confronting directly. Students, in other words, "have not been trained to ask questions" (Katchen, 1989:81). They expect the "authority" to tell them what to do and what not to, what is right and what is wrong.

However, Ho (2001) points out that in the Chinese classroom, the teacher's authority ensures that they can control the classroom and teach better, but after class teachers will make use of every opportunity to establish a warm and affectionate relationship with their students, which is not common in the West. Such personal and warm relationship outside the classroom contributes to the effective classroom teaching. Scollon and Scollon (in Ho & Crookall, 1995:237) explains how Asian perceive authority: "The Asian focuses on the care, nurture and benevolence (or their absence) of the person in authority". In Chinese education, one of the expectations people hold towards teachers is that teachers should care for and nurture their students. Therefore, teachers are seen as the authority in the formal setting and as friends in the informal setting.

Harmony

Chinese people like to create and keep a harmonious relationship with others. They do not want to cause conflict and believe they should be modest and friendly. This idea of harmony was expressed clearly by Yi Jing, Taoism, Confucius and Buddhism. Several academics (Zhang, 2005, Dan & Zhou, 2005) have pointed out the influence of these on education in China. In Yi Jing, the balance of Yin and Yang reflects the beauty of harmony. If such a balance is destroyed, the development would not be as smooth as it should be. In Taoism, it is believed that one should not be aggressive and compete with others. Everyone should be humble and not show off and the relationship between people should be harmonious. "An intensive review of the literature on aggressive behavior in Chinese society indicated that Chinese tend to discourage and inhibit aggressive outbursts in order to maintain interpersonal harmony within their group" (Hwang, 1987:952). Confucius claims that harmony is the most important thing in interpersonal relationships because it will bring peace and reduce friction between people (*Lun Yu*). He allows people to hold different views but this should always be under the umbrella of harmony. In other words, you do not need to agree with everything others say but you should always respect others and try not to fight with them and break the harmonious relationship between you all. Buddhism is similar in the way that it promotes the idea of maintaining peace within oneself and being tolerant towards others. All these thoughts have influenced Chinese education.

Being able to create and maintain a harmonious relationship with others has been seen as one of the qualities an educated person should develop. In Hwang's (1987:956) eyes, "it seems that maintaining group harmony and integrity is much more important to a Chinese than is insisting on distributive equity". Therefore, those who contributed more than their friends prefer to divide any reward equally among members in order to keep the harmony at the expense of their personal gain.

Collectivism

Chinese culture advocates unification of a group and tends to ignore individual needs. Contribution to the group is far more important than what one gains from it. Individual's interests and values can only be achieved when the group's interest has been satisfied (Dan & Zhou, 2005). In the context of education, teachers try to emphasize that learners should ignore individual needs but to think more about their class, school and the country. People believe individual needs should be sacrificed for the benefit of the group they belong to or the whole country. As Yang (1986, cited in Tang, 1996:183) concludes, "the Chinese see collective welfare and social concerns as more important than personal enjoyment and feelings."

The result is that when students are put into learning groups, they will help each other so that the whole group outperforms other groups. Nelson (1995) also states that Chinese students learn through co-operation. Both Tang (1996) and Winter (1996) have done some research around this and realize that Chinese students do like to work together and they actually do very well when they do so.

If we look at these four features together, it is not difficult to see that harmony is actually the essence of Chinese culture and the ultimate goal for many Chinese people. People cooperate well within a group because they want to create and maintain harmony. They watch their behaviour carefully so that others' face is protected. If every individual's face and the group's face are maintained, they are likely to work harmoniously to produce the best result. A teacher should try to find a balance between an authority and a friend because he/she needs to create a harmonious teacher-student relationship in order to achieve the best teaching result. These four factors have been found to be true in a face-to-face teaching environment. Teachers do need to take them into consideration when teaching. Do they also influence learners in an online environment? This paper will explore the influence of Chinese culture on trainees' online behaviours in the hope that materials designers and online tutors will pay attention to culture when designing and delivering online courses.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The Project

This paper reports the findings that emerged from a pilot project within the *eChina~UK* eLearning Programme that was undertaken collaboratively by the University of Nottingham, UK (UoN) and Beijing Normal University, China (BNU). The teams developed online materials on methodology for English language teaching. The pilot was conducted in Beijing over 5 weeks during March and April 2005. Twelve participants, all secondary school English teachers, volunteered to complete five weeks of online learning using the pilot materials and take part in a group project in the last week. These online pilot materials included two weeks of introduction to the Chinese New National Curriculum of English and two weeks of work on teaching grammar. The open source Moodle platform was used and the material was presented in English as the participants were English teachers. All of the participants completed the pilot.

The Subjects

There were altogether twelve participants. Ten of them are Junior High Middle school teachers and two are teachers at vocational schools. Their teaching experience ranged from more than six years to only one year. Eight of them were experienced teachers, three had less experience and one was a novice teacher. Seven of them had participated in a face-to-face teacher training course (not including their diploma courses) and felt that was a positive experience, but concerns were expressed about the training venue being too far away. Only two of the participants had experience of a web-based training course, but both refer to a course to improve their English rather than teaching methodology. This was the first time for all of them to try a teaching methodology course online.

The teachers' computer skills varied dramatically. Some of them used a computer everyday and some of them rarely or never used computers in their daily life. The teachers' Information Communication Technology (ICT) literacy levels were different; four of them can be considered to have high ICT literacy, five to have medium and three to have low ICT literacy.

A few of them were classmates in a night school and had classes together twice a week but they were not familiar with each other. Some of them were total strangers to each other.

Data Collection Methods

During the piloting of the programme, a range of methods was used to collect data on the trainees' reactions to and evaluations of the course materials.

1. Focus group interview: Two focus group interviews were conducted, one in the middle and one at the end of the pilot in order to explore the student experience, gain their views on the pedagogic effectiveness of the eLearning approach and of the nature of the support.
2. Observations: Six representative participants, who varied in the number of years of teaching experience and in ICT literacy, were selected and they came for observation to BNU once a week – 2 came on a Wednesday and 4 on a Thursday. They studied the online material in a computer room with the evaluator observing them and they discussed with each other their problems, the ways to solve them and what they were learning. They also shared their experiences with the evaluator/tutor and this was recorded in the tutor diary – see 6 below.
3. Online behaviour tracking of individual involvement with the learning material, bulletin board, discussion forum, tea house, emails between tutor-learners/learners-learners: This provided an indication of patterns of online behaviour.
4. Audio diary: Participants were asked to keep an audio diary during the process of learning. It was suggested that they record their feelings and thoughts about their online learning experience.
5. Tutor diary: The tutor kept a diary during the pilot and recorded the most significant moments and their reflections upon the experience.

The Role of the Researcher

As one of the course developers, I had a very good understanding of the pilot material. In the pilot, I acted as both the researcher and the tutor. This enabled me to 'indwell' easily and develop a rapport with the participants, who readily shared their concerns and experiences. This was helped by the fact that for the pilot there was no formal summative assessment, all assessment was viewed as formative and activities were ungraded. The tutor's role was therefore seen as supportive and non judgmental. This approach was seen as important for the evaluation of the pilot in which the level of complexity was high, i.e. innovative online learning delivered in China to inexperienced online learners on a new and untested platform, demanding high levels of tutoring skills.

RESULTS

This paper will focus on the trainees' reactions to their online learning experiences, rather than on their comments on the content of the course. It demonstrates some of the challenges facing eTutors when trying to build up an online community in a Chinese context, and illustrates how online materials should be tailored to enhance Chinese teacher trainees' learning experiences.

The analysis of the data revealed the following key findings:

The Challenge of Face

The teacher trainees did not like to take the initiative to raise questions and comment on other trainees' opinions at the beginning. At that time, most of their postings were for the tutor and most of them simply put up their answers to questions in the material. As the tutor, I was worried, so I encouraged them to join the discussion and kept telling them that they could learn from each other. They were very polite by including a line at the end of their postings like this "What do you think?" or "I want to know your thoughts/opinions." When they started to comment on each others' work, they tended to protect each others' face carefully. The analysis of the content shows that none of them used any strong disagreement statements. They would avoid criticizing others' opinions. However, they did well in criticizing a person outside the online community. For example, in the material, one of the activities was to watch a sample lesson and comment on it. Some of them used languages like "I don't think it's a good way to..." and some criticized the teacher for preparing long before that lesson. As long as the person is not present, real comments will come out. This is echoed by reality. As a teacher trainer myself, I have been to many demonstration classes and the comments made to the teacher by his/her colleagues or fellow teachers are mostly positive. This kind of practice has lost the original advantage of class observation.

Obviously, course designers might consider avoiding making learners to comment on each others' performance. Instead, make them comment on a third party, which is still helpful in helping them learn.

The Need for Authority

Just as students expect their teacher to know everything and have solutions for everything, online learners have similar needs. In this particular methodology course, teachers are eager to have some "experts" or "excellent teachers" to offer solutions to their problems. They seemed to have little confidence in their own expertise and wanted "experts" to comment on their daily practice or their answers to the questions in the material. For example: three of the participants expressed their lack of confidence in their abilities as a group of practitioners and this affected their ability to contribute to discussions. They felt only real experts can find solutions for them.

"I don't think we as ordinary teachers have the ability to discuss about teaching methods. I prefer to have some excellent teachers to show us how they teach certain lessons or language points so that we can learn from them."
Zhao Ling

"I'd rather have some experts to comment on my report of my lesson or my other experience. This can help me better because they'll point out the space for improvement."
Liu Lianxi

"We as teachers are facing the similar problems but who can tell us the manageable solutions? I think Chinese experts can help. We don't have good solutions."
Xie Zhexiang

Nevertheless, they believed they knew their students best and regarded the suggestions offered by "Western experts" as not being very suitable. All the interviews showed that they were very concerned about obtaining "correct answers", rather than discussing them in a forum, yet their oral diaries and private dialogues with me indicated that they were very doubtful about many of the suggestions offered by the course writers. This finding shows that as adults, these teachers do not believe blindly what an "authority" says, instead, they have their own thoughts. Since every teaching context is different, teachers should not use any methods without thinking thoroughly about them. In this sense, the need for an authority should be considered by course developers and yet teacher trainees should be encouraged to bring their own expertise into the course. The confidence in themselves and the ability to improve their teaching based on authorities' suggestions as well as their own judgment can then be developed

The importance of harmony

The teacher trainees liked to show that they cared about each other. Warm-up topics that related to their daily lives, their housework, their holidays, etc. were very helpful for establishing harmonious relationships between them, which definitely supported their learning.

Many of them mentioned that they would like to open the postings with the title of "Help" and offered their help if they could.

"I will definitely open those titled 'Help' in the discussion forum. I want to help them because when I have problems, I would also put up a 'Help' posting and expect others to help me." -Wen Zhang

"I can understand you. If you have something unknown, I'd like to help you." -Zhao Minqian

These are typical quotes from the trainees. One of the important things a person should know in order to create harmony is that he/she should have empathy. This trainee has obviously put on others' spectacles and sees the world through them. Being helpful is an indication of wanting to be a friend of others.

Another way these trainees used to create harmony was to send greetings and compliments to each other to show that they care about each other.

Example 1:

*"Hi, Xing. You are really **great!** I've seen what you posted on the forum. I'll do what I should do as soon as possible. ... I hope we can do our work very well. **Are you better** now?"* - Peng Yuanxia

*"Glad to hear from you! You are so **thoughtful.** I'm feeling much better now. Thanks!"* -Xie Zhexiang

Example 2:

"I am still catching every moment to try to finish the questions according to the pilot. I hope I am not too late to catch you."
-Zhao Ling

"Don't worry. I think Ms Chen can understand you....Remember we are all working together."

-Peng Yuanxia

Example 3:

"Ms Chen, I'm terribly sorry to say I'm afraid that I can not attend the meeting tomorrow!...I hurt my foot by accident and it is so hurt that I can hardly move..."
-Li Shaoqian

"I'm sorry to hear that. What a pity! ... Hope you will be better soon. My best wishes!" -Xie Zhexiang

At the end of the pilot, all participants came to a party and everybody expressed their gratefulness to this big community and they said they had made a lot of new friends here and they enjoyed the learning very much.

Meanwhile, as a tutor, I also tried to act as their friends and establish a desirable relationship with the trainees. I offered my suggestions and tried to be helpful with their study, demonstrating a certain degree of my expertise on one hand, on the other hand, I created opportunities for establishing a warm and close relationship through discussions, text messages as well as email exchanges. Many of them reported that it was my support and friendship that encouraged them to stay with the pilot.

"There were so much to do in the pilot and I was very busy with all kinds of work everyday. It should be easy for me to find an excuse and quit in the middle. However, with the support and influence of my tutor, I had the courage to conquer any difficulty and now I'm glad I managed to stay till the end. Every time I went over the material, I had deeper understanding and it enlightened my ideas to change my teaching."
- Zhao Minqian

"I got to know some very good friends here who are very kind to me. My tutor was also pretty, patient and kind. These have become my motivation in learning."
- Man Jingxiu

"Luckily, we had a responsible, patient, thoughtful and considerate tutor – Ms Chen. Without her, this course might have not been completed successfully."
-Xian Feng

All they try to say is that a successful online course needs a tutor who can act both as an expert and a nice friend for the trainees. They need the tutor's suggestions and advice sometimes and they also need a listener and someone whom they can share their experiences and thoughts with. Equally important, the trainees' efforts in creating and maintaining a harmonious online environment also determines the effect of the course.

The use of group projects

Group projects were very effective with these teachers. In the last week of the pilot, three group leaders were appointed by the tutor and each group was expected to carry out a mini-research project related to the New Curriculum or Teaching Grammar. The three group leaders became very active users of the discussion forum because they had to post notices and get their group members' attention. Each group leader put up a posting and the group members tried to decide the topic for their research together. This small group work led by group leaders produced high levels of online activity. Some participants felt that they were part of a small community and they had a sense of belonging. Group members felt there was someone who was monitoring them now. They didn't want to upset their group leader so they worked together and carried out the research. Once they had established a sense of belonging, their cooperation became very effective because they worked for the common good and did not want to be left behind by other groups. The group leaders, once appointed, worked hard as they felt it was their responsibility to make the group project successful, so they tried all means to push the group members to contribute. The following are taken from the postings put up by group leaders:

Leader1 -- "Hi, I feel very happy that we can work together by this special way. What do you think of it?...I hope we will finish the task **successfully**. Let's **do it together** and **try our best**."

Leader 1 -- "I hope we four can **cooperate happily**."

Leader 2 -- "Please help me complete the list above and correct them in a more useful way! Every suggestion is welcome. Thank you **from the bottom of my heart**."

Leader 2 -- "Thank you for your all **hard-working**."

Leader 3 -- “Hope we can **get along well with** each other, and **happiness** in every day!”

Notice that all three leaders expressed their gratitude for their group members’ effort and cooperation. Two of them mentioned “cooperate happily” and “get along well with each other”. The second leader, although she did not write this down, also hoped her members would support each other by cooperating actively. What is more, the word “successfully” often appeared in the postings during that time, which indicated both the leader and group members were willing to produce “good” work. If they were given more time, the result of the group project should be much better.

CONCLUSION

Online learning is becoming a more and more important research area in the academic world. How learners perform in an online environment is crucial to the success of the course. Asian and Western cultures generate different educational philosophies and beliefs. In a Chinese context, how to create and maintain a harmonious online community is a big task for tutors. This paper has discussed the distinct online behaviours of trainees in detail, explained their close interconnection with the trainees’ educational/cultural background. It explores some ways in which eTutors can effectively address the challenges that they raise, and how they can build on the strengths that are offered. A good understanding of these processes is essential in order to promote better online teacher education in China in the new century.

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