Academic Cultures in Distance between Penn State
Taiwanese Graduate Students and American Teachers: A
Case Study

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Abstract
Academic cultures in distance between ESL/EFL students and native English-speaking teachers have been one of the research focuses in the TESL field for the past decade. Many researchers argued for the need of exploring the mismatching beliefs/expectations about learning and teaching between ESL/EFL students and their native English-speaking teachers. This study aimed to investigate the differences between EFL Taiwanese students and their American teachers concerning their beliefs/expectations toward what constitutes a good teaching and learning. It further explored how those differences might cause EFL Taiwanese students’ cross-cultural adjustment problems, and push both students and teachers to modify their learning or teaching strategies. Eight Taiwanese graduate students with different majors at Penn State University in the U.S. were the participants, interviewed concerning their perspectives about different cultures of learning between Taiwanese and American teachers/students in an academic setting. The results of this research yielded positive evidence that academic cultures in distance between Taiwanese students and their American teachers might exist in the classroom at Penn State University. In addition, five issues related to cultures were identified as the main factors that caused the different expectations/beliefs/attitudes about learning and teaching between Taiwanese students and their American teachers: authority in power, learner autonomy, the power issue, the face issue, and group harmony.

Based on the findings, this research provided not only a framework for understanding Taiwanese students’ culture of learning, but also useful suggestions for education in the field of TESL as well as in cross-cultural studies. It could be innovative with respect to language pedagogy and language learning in the U.S. as well as in Taiwan.

Key words: academic cultures, culture of learning, ESL, EFL, TESL
Introduction

Many cross-cultural studies show that academic cultures in distance, a situation of cultural obstacles between ESL/EFL students and their native English teachers, is a common situation occurring in the academic setting where two different cultures come into contact in the classroom, especially in the ESL/EFL academic setting where the classroom mainly consists of two roles—native English-speaking teachers and ESL/EFL learners, with each coming from different cultures (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999; Han, 2005; Hofstede, 1990; Littlewood, 2001; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Scollon, 1999). In addition, in the field of SLA, many researchers argue that not only L2 (second language) cultures but also the native cultures of L2 learners can influence the SLA since L2 students consciously or unconsciously bring their native cultures into their L2 classroom (Camps & Ivanic, 2001; Kramsch, 1993; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). Kramsch (1993) argues that a L2 learner’s understanding of conceptualizations and construct in the second culture is fundamentally affected by his/her own “native” culture in terms of worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and presuppositions. Palfreyman and Smith (2003) further claim that in the L2 classroom, not only the students but also teachers bring their own cultures into the L2 classroom. Accordingly, the L2 classroom becomes a place where these two different cultures come into contact with each other. Because L2 students and teachers are both the products of their own cultures, and thus their values, expectations, beliefs, and worldviews are all influenced by their cultural background. Therefore, the factor—the academic cultures in distance between L2 teachers and students is also very important for language teachers to pay attention to since the two different cultures will lead to different cultural values and expectations. Moreover, it could result in different educational developments and outcomes.

Therefore, this research study argues that there is an important need to examine both ESL/EFL learners’ beliefs/expectations about learning/teaching and their native English-speaking teachers’, and how those beliefs and expectations might be affected by their prior experiences in the environment of their L1 cultures. In addition, we also need to explore how the differences between ESL/EFL learners’ and their native English-speaking teachers’ expectations/beliefs/attitudes/values toward what is good learning and teaching might affect ESL/EFL learners’ cross-cultural adjustment. Lastly, it is also important to investigate how both ESL/EFL learners’ and teachers’ expectations about learning and teaching might be modified by the norms and values in the ESL/EFL classroom, and how their learning/teaching strategies or styles might be modified in order to survive in the new ESL/EFL academic setting. It is hoped that by exploring these aspects, this study could provide useful insight for ESL/EFL learners or teachers not only in language learning or teaching, but also in other aspects, such as cross-cultural adjustment.
Therefore, the findings of this research might be useful for the field of ESL/EFL, as well as for other academic disciplines. Additionally, this study might be an innovation with respect to language pedagogy and language learning in Taiwan as well as in other countries.

Statement of the problem

There is a limited amount of research that has focused on the population of Taiwanese students in the U.S. (Chen, 1995; Lin, 1996; Ying & Liese, 1994), especially related to their beliefs/attitudes/values/expectations about learning and teaching. None have focused exclusively on how and in what aspects those differences between Taiwanese students’ prior expectations and their classroom experiences in United State classrooms might affect them. For instance, how might the new academic environment in the United States influence Taiwanese students’ cross-cultural adjustment, and also their learning strategies in order to survive in the new cultural environment? In addition, not much research focuses on how those differences between Taiwanese students’ and American teachers’ beliefs/attitudes about learning and teaching could affect American teachers’ teaching.

Purpose of the study

This study not only investigates Penn State Taiwanese graduate students’ beliefs/expectations/attitudes toward learning and teaching in the classroom, but also explores how the differences between their expectation and their classroom experiences in the United States classroom affect them. This study also aims at investigating how Taiwanese students’ prior expectations/beliefs about learning and teaching, and also their learning strategies might be modified in order to adjust to the new academic cultural environment. Lastly, this study will explore how American teachers adjust the way they teach based on Taiwanese students’ learning styles and preferences.

Research questions

1. What are eight Penn State Taiwanese graduate students’ expectations/beliefs about learning and teaching?
2. What are eight Penn State Taiwanese graduate students’ perceived differences between their expectations about learning and teaching and their experiences in the U.S. classrooms?
3. How do eight Penn State Taiwanese graduate students adjust to the perceived differences between their expectations about learning and teaching and their experiences in the U.S. classroom?
Literature Review

Researchers have also shown that not only L2 cultures but also the native cultures of L2 students (L1 cultures) can influence SLA (Byram & Morgan, 1994; Kramsch, 1993). For example, some research focusing on L2 writing indicates that L2 students usually consciously or unconsciously bring their native culture into their written text and are influenced by it since it is easy to find their own cultural identities in their L2 writing (Camps & Ivanic, 2001; Prior, 2001; Belcher & Hirvela, 2001). First, Camps and Ivanic (2001, p. 3) state, “writing always conveys a representation of the self of the writer. All writing contains voice in the Bakhtinian sense of reaccentuating voice types, which locate their users culturally and historically.” Therefore, a critical pedagogy in L2 writing is recommended that “can help learners maintain control over the personal and cultural identity they are projecting in their writing” (Camps & Ivanic, 2001, p. 3). Second, Belcher and Hirvela (2001) point out a problem existing in the current L2 writing research or pedagogy that results from the ignorance of the voices, identities, or cultures that L2 writers already bring to the L2 classroom.

When exploring teachers’ using the methods of comparison or contrast in teaching language and culture, Byram and Morgan (1994) also argue that L2 learners enter the L2 classroom with their own native cultures, which is already a part of themselves. It is impossible that L2 learners can simply get rid of their own cultures when they are learning the L2 and L2 cultures. L2 learners are essentially bonded with their native cultures. Therefore, Byram and Morgan (1994) instead suggest the need for L2 learners to confront their own cultures. Byram and Morgan (1994, p. 44) explain, “learners need to become aware of their own cultural schemata in order to effect an acknowledgement of those of a different culture.” Similarly, Kramsch (1993) emphasizes the significance of the role of L1 cultures in the L2 classroom. She argues that due to the fact that L2 learners’ worldviews, values, beliefs, and assumptions are bounded and affected by their L1 cultures, their understanding of L2 cultures will be more or less influenced. Consequently, it will affect L2 learners’ SLA as well.

Furthermore, researchers argue that not only students but also teachers bring their own cultures into the L2 classroom (McGroarty & Galvan, 1985). Accordingly, teachers themselves are the products of their own cultures, and their worldview is influenced by their cultural background. Different cultural values and expectations, moreover, might result in different educational outcomes and development. A good example of this is the case that Gurney (1987) addresses that if American teachers represent the culture of the United States well, there can be little danger of their making false assumptions about the cultural behaviors of their students. As a result, it is often suggested that teachers should have a basic empathy for differences among cultures as well as a broad awareness of American cultures.
Several research studies point out that academic cultures in distance occur more often in the academic setting where the classroom consists of two main roles—the native English-speaking teachers and the ESL/EFL students, both of whom have different cultural background (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999; Han, 2005; Hofstede, 1990; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Scollon, 1999). First, Scollon (1999) employs an ethnographic approach to classroom interactions between students and teachers in one Hong Kong institution where Western foreign teachers are lecturing to a class of Chinese students whose native language is Cantonese. She found that cultural constructs really underlie and affect the views of the goals of education in Chinese and Western classrooms, and that shapes the behavior of students and teachers. In other words, the differences between Chinese students’ and their Western foreign teachers’ behavior and expectations in the classroom result from their different cultures and cultural philosophy. For example, affected by traditional Chinese culture—Confucian thinking, Hong Kong students are concerned more with the consequences of their efforts, especially their grades, and express little effort into getting at the truth (Brown, 2000; Scollon, 1999). On the contrary, their Western teachers, who are affected by Western cultures of Socratic thinking, are unaccustomed to this kind of thinking. Teachers sometimes even suspect that every little action of Hong Kong students is fed into a calculator to determine the possible effect on grades (Scollon, 1999).

Second, another research study by Chelho (1998) also points out the academic cultural in distance resulting from the different cultural values, attitudes and expectations about learning and teaching between students and teachers. Chelho (1998) emphasizes that in multicultural classrooms, the mismatch between the students’ learning styles and the teachers’ instructional styles might be a main aspect that teachers need to pay attention to. She further argues that teachers’ beliefs and values about learning and teaching might not be consonant with those of their students’ because students’ or teachers’ values and expectations about learning and teaching might be formed and depend on the social and cultural environment in which they were raised or experienced. Consequently, a miscommunication or conflict between students and teachers could exist in the classroom. For example, Chelho (1998) mentioned the mismatch between group of Chinese students’ learning styles and American teachers’ teaching styles. Chinese students seemed to care about saving face, were not willing to participate or ask questions in the classroom activities, and had respect for elders and authorities. American teachers, on the other hand, tended to prefer their students to participate more in class, to be more willing to take risks, and to challenge authorities.

Third, a similar research study to Coelho (1998) was conducted by Cortazzi and Jin in 1998 and 1999, who first mentioned the concept of culture of learning. Culture of learning, as defined by Cortazzi and Jin (1998 & 1999), refers to culturally deep-rooted expectations, attitudes, and beliefs about how to behave, how to learn, and how to interpret others’ behavior in the classroom. Cortazzi and Jin (1998 ; 1999) argue that L2 students learn about target
cultures, but their way of learning is part of their own culture, acquired in most cases long before entering a foreign language classroom. Similarly, teachers may teach about target cultures, but their way of teaching is not solely influenced by their professional training but is also influenced by their culture of learning. The culture of learning that students and teachers bring to the classroom is a taken-for-granted framework of expectations, attitudes, values, and beliefs about what constitutes good learning and good teaching. Since L2 learners and teachers come from different cultures, it is natural that their culture of learning may not be consonant with each other and, thus, they have different expectations, attitudes, values, and beliefs about what constitutes good learning and teaching.

Many examples related to the different academic culture of learning between Chinese students and the Western teachers are pointed out by Cortazzi and Jin (1998; 1999). Firstly, the Western teachers generally consider using the textbook merely as a resource and expect students to actively participate in classroom discussion and critically evaluate the content of the textbook, while many Chinese students regard the role of textbook as the roles of teachers and authorities and tend to accept the information from the textbook uncritically. They hesitate to express their own thinking in the classroom discussion before reflecting carefully and making sure that their opinions are of use and help. In addition, many Chinese students are worried that they might prevent the teacher from talking and might be criticized for showing off by their classmates if they express too many comments in class. In their opinions, it should be the teacher, not the student that transmits knowledge and talks in class. In addition, Chinese students seem to pay more attention to social relationships in the classroom, such as respecting teachers and classmates, and care about face issues and group harmony. Secondly, many Chinese students think asking questions in class will result in wasting time or being thought of as foolish. Some prefer to ask questions individually after class in order not to interrupt the class or lose face. However, this pattern of asking questions could frustrate some Western teachers, who think asking questions should be in class and not occupy teachers’ time after class, especially if these questions are useful to the entire class. Lastly, Western teachers consider Chinese students diligent, well motivated, and friendly to the teachers, but passive and unwilling to participate in group discussion or give comments in class. Chinese students seem to care more about grades, exams, and memorization, but not about the knowledge itself. In the meantime, Western teachers are popular with Chinese students because of certain aspects, such as their pronunciation as a native speaker and for their cultural knowledge, but are considered as less helpful in teaching grammar and vocabulary than Chinese teachers since many Chinese students think that Western teachers pay more attention to communication rather than to linguistic knowledge and mental activity. Some Western teachers are even considered poor teachers because that they emphasize pair and group discussion.
Methodology

Participants

In order to find Taiwanese graduate students for this study, the researchers posted an email on the website of the Taiwanese Student Association of Penn State University. Within two months, eight Taiwanese students replied via email and volunteered to be the research participants, including two men and two women studying less than one year at Penn State, and two men and two women studying more than one year at Penn State. These eight Taiwanese students were all born in Taiwan, got their Bachelor degree in Taiwan, and then went to Penn State to study in the graduate school. For confidentiality, all of the participants will remain anonymous throughout the whole data analysis and discussion.

Table 1. Background Information of Eight Taiwanese Graduate Students

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name / Gender</th>
<th>Length of time at Penn State / Working experience</th>
<th>Educational Background</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fong / Female</td>
<td>Less than one year / As an English teacher in a high school for five years in Taiwan</td>
<td>Got her Bachelor degree in English in Taiwan, and now studying TESL for her Master degree</td>
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<td>Lin / Female</td>
<td>Less than one year / As a part-time teacher in a secondary school and also a church counselor for four years in Taiwan.</td>
<td>Got her bachelor degree in Chinese in Taiwan, and now studying in education for her Master degree.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ying / Male</td>
<td>Less than one year / As an engineer in one company for one year, and as a counselor and a teaching assistant in a university for one year in Taiwan</td>
<td>Got his Bachelor degree in Management Science in Taiwan, and got his Master degree in Psychology in another university in the U.S. Now he is studying in education at Penn State</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wang</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Less than one year / As a business and finance teacher in an institute in Taiwan for ten years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>More than one year / As an English teacher in a vocational high school for seven years, and in a college for over ten years in Taiwan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>More than one year / As an English teacher for one year in a language school in Taiwan, and then a flight attendant for seven years in Taiwan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeh</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>More than one year / As a teacher in an elementary school in Taiwan for several years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>More than one year / As a public servant for seven years in Taiwan.</td>
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</table>
Data Collection Method

The data collection method for this study is an in-depth interview. All of the first interviews were arranged beforehand. Each interview took about two hours or less and was tape-recorded. All of the interviews were recorded in Chinese and then transcribed into English. All the first interviews with participants were face-to-face conversations focusing on open-ended questions. During the interview, the researcher used a tape recorder to tape the participants’ responses. The use of the tape recording also functioned as a technique of member checking for the researcher. In other words, the taping ensured that the researcher could give each participant a transcript of interview data through email. This member checking ensured that the researcher could exclude any material from the study that made the participant uncomfortable, and also guaranteed that each participant’s perspective was precisely presented. In addition to the first interview, there were follow-up interviews for each participant for the purpose of clarification. To put it more precisely, after the first interview, the researcher interviewed each participant again by phone or through email in order to clarify some doubts from the interview data.

Data Analysis Method

The interview data was recorded and analyzed based on the methods by Marshall and Rossman (1999): organizing the data; generating categories, themes and patterns; coding the data; testing emergent understandings; searching for alternative explanations; and writing the report. Basically, this interview data was analyzed deeply and grounded into several categories based on the share perceptions of these eight Penn State Taiwanese graduate students.

Validity and Reliability

In order to increase this study’s internal validity, member checking was used. In this study, each participant was given a transcript of the interview, and thus they could have the opportunity to pick out and correct the errors in the transcript. Concerning the term “reliability”, the key issue was not that similar results would be found but if the results were consistent with data collected. Therefore, the investigator’s position including the basis for selecting informants, and an audit trail consisting of interview tapes and transcriptions, were used to ensure the reliability of this research. Lastly, in this study, the researcher provided a thick description of the study’s findings, including a comparison of the findings of this study with those of other studies in literature in order to increase the external validity of the study.
Results and Discussions

Based on the interview data above, in which eight Taiwanese students shared their experiences and stories of learning in Taiwan and the USA, two summary tables for each participant were made. Table 2 is the summary of the shared perceptions of the eight Taiwanese students, while Table 3 is the summary of the unique perceptions of the eight Taiwanese students.

Table 2 consists of twenty-seven perceptions which most of these eight Taiwanese participants had in common. In other words, these twenty-seven perceptions were the ones that not necessarily each of these eight participants all shared in common, but that most of them did. To put it more precisely, there were other additional perceptions mentioned in the interview; however, since these additional perceptions were mentioned by only one or two participants, these additional perceptions were not listed in Table 2 but in Table 3 instead. In other words, Table 3 consists of those unique perceptions that only one or two participants had, and those which were not shared with most participants. Below Table 2 will be discussed first, and then Table 3.

By checking Table 2, we could clearly see what perceptions in the table all of the participants shared and those they did not. Therefore, the main function of this table is to summarize the interviews with these participants and to make comparisons among these participants.

It should be noted that there are two interviews for each participant. In Table 2 following each perception are two rows. The first row stands for the results of the first interview, and the second row is the result of the follow-up interview. A check in a row indicates when the participant expressed the perception. Because those participants did not necessarily propose all those twenty-six perceptions in their first interview, the follow-up interview provides a good opportunity for the researcher of this study to continue to question each participant, focusing on those perceptions that most participants proposed but that the individual participant did not propose in the first interview. For instance, Perception 3, related to having problems writing papers, was proposed by Fong, Lin, Wang, Chen, and Mei in their first interview. That is, the other three participants, Ying, Yeh, and Huang, did not mention this perception in their interview. Therefore, in the second interview, Ying, Yeh, and Huang were asked questions concerning this perception for the purpose of clarifying if they also had any problems writing papers. As a result, it provided a better opportunity for the researcher of this study to make a more complete comparison among these eight Taiwanese participants. Based on Table 2, we could find that Perception 1, 2, 3, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21 and 26 are the ones that not every participant shared, while the others in the table are the ones that each participant had in
Table 2. Summary of the Shared Perceptions of the Eight Taiwanese Students

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<th>Perception</th>
<th>Fong</th>
<th>Lin</th>
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<th>Chen</th>
<th>Mei</th>
<th>Yeh</th>
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<td>1. Feel anxious or lose self-esteem attending courses.</td>
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<td>2. Find it difficult to blend in American culture and make friends with American classmates.</td>
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<td>3. Have problems writing papers.</td>
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<td>4. Think there are too many papers or readings.</td>
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<td>5. Feel uncomfortable in sharing opinions or asking questions in class.</td>
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<td>7. Care about saving face</td>
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<td>8. Think that there should be a balance between teachers’ lectures and students’ group discussions &amp; presentations.</td>
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<td>9. Think that teachers should give a summary at the end of the group discussion.</td>
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<td>10. Push himself / herself to study harder, participate, and be more critical in class</td>
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<td>11. Consider American teachers as easygoing and encouraging.</td>
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<td>12. Consider American teachers as flexible in teaching &amp; grading, and use different resources to facilitate their teaching.</td>
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<td>17. Think American teachers</td>
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24. Consider Taiwanese students unwilling to participate and ask questions in class.

25. Consider Taiwanese students unwilling to challenge teachers.

26. Think that English proficiency is one factor that affects Taiwanese students’ participation in class.

27. Think that culture leads to the difference between American and Taiwanese teachers / students.

Table 3 presents the unique perceptions of the eight Taiwanese participants. There are totally seventeen perceptions in this table. A check indicates that the individual participant expressed having this perception. Therefore, by analyzing Table 3, it is clear what unique perceptions that each individual participant had. However, some unique perceptions are shared between two participants. For instance, Perception 4 is shared with Fong and Yeh. That is, participants Fong and Yeh both felt that their opinions were ignored by some of their American classmates.

**Table 3. Summary of the Unique Perceptions of the Eight Taiwanese Students**


1. Some American students are shy and silent in class.  

2. The interactive activities some Taiwanese teachers use in class are less organized and planned than American teachers.

3. The courses offered by her department are too theoretical.
4. Some American students ignore other students’ opinions.

5. Some Taiwanese teachers often delay the due date for their students’ assignments.

6. American teachers are more willing to give students high scores as long as their students meet the class criteria.

7. Case study classes are the most helpful.

8. Taiwanese teachers should understand that it is the teachers’ duty and responsibility to satisfy students’ needs.

9. American teachers are sometimes too strict in grading group presentations.

10. American students call their professors by the first name without using a title.

11. Some American teachers seem to be nice to students only in class, not after class.

12. Some American students do not respect Asian cultures.

13. Most American teachers do not really want to help international students solve problems caused by cultural differences.

14. American students are usually confident and know how to promote themselves.
This American trait is contrast to that of Taiwanese students.

15. Taiwanese teachers should try to use different kinds of interactive activities to give students more chances to express their opinions and thoughts in class.

16. One American professor in his department is discriminating against international students.

17. Prefer three-hour courses could be divided into two or three classes per week.

Based on Table 2, consisting of twenty-seven perceptions which most of these eight Taiwanese participants had in common, a further step of analysis was made. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the issues that might underlie these twenty-seven perceptions in Table 2. A visual model consists of a comparison and contrast of themes focusing on the distances between American and Taiwanese academic cultures, which demonstrates how these eight Taiwanese students perceived and compared the academic cultural differences between Taiwan and the USA based on their expectations and their experiences in American classrooms, was yielded (see Figure 1). This model consists of two main categories: (1) academic cultural distance between Taiwan and the U.S.A, and (2) the problems Taiwanese students encountered at Penn State. Most of all, five issues that underlie the first category, academic cultural distance between Taiwan and the U.S.A, are identified: (1) authority in knowledge, (2) learner autonomy, (3) the power issue, (4) the face issue, and (5) group harmony. To put it more precisely, these five issues explain what caused the differences between these Taiwanese participants’ expectations and their experiences in American classrooms. In addition, this visual model shows the first main category (academic cultural distance between Taiwan and the USA) leads to the second main category (the problems Taiwanese students encountered at Penn State). Lastly, the category of English proficiency is also another factor that leads to the problems Taiwanese students encountered at Penn State.
Figure 1. Visual Model of Differences between Taiwanese Students’ Expectations and Their Experiences in American classrooms
Five issues that underlie Academic Cultural Distance between Taiwan and the USA

According to Figure 1, the first category of academic cultural distance between Taiwan and the USA is divided into five sub-categories: teacher-centered/learner-centered, uncritical/critical, authoritative & serious/easygoing & encouraging, passive participation/active involvement, and rarely asking questions/frequently asking questions. In addition, five issues that underlie the main category of academic cultural distance between Taiwan and the USA are authority in power, learner autonomy, the power issue, the face issue, and group harmony. Since the purpose of this figure is to identify and explain why these five issues underlie and cause the distance between Taiwanese and American academic cultures based on Taiwanese participants’ expectations and their experiences in American classrooms, the main focus in this part will be on these five issues, which will be discussed separately.

Authority in Knowledge

In this section, the main focus is to explain how the value of authority in knowledge underlies some of these eight Taiwanese students’ perceptions about the academic cultural distances between Taiwan and the USA based on their expectations and experiences in American classrooms. First, even though these Taiwanese participants mentioned that they appreciated learner-centered activities, such as group discussion, it seemed that they still were accustomed to a teacher-centered approach. We could easily find evidence to support this from Table 2. For example, Perceptions 8 and 9 in Table 2 pointed out that these eight Taiwanese students believed that there should be a balance between teachers’ lectures and students’ group discussion and presentation. In addition, they also believed that teachers should give a summary at the end of the group discussion. Ying mentioned

The most of useful class that I wanted to attend was the class where teachers clearly expressed their ideas and thoughts to students, and led us into group discussion, and gave feedback and conclusions at the end of students’ group discussion and presentations. This kind of teaching definitely could give students direction. I consider giving lectures as necessary and important.

Based on the above, it is easily to infer that these eight Taiwanese students still preferred a teacher-centered teaching approach. Taiwanese students preferred this approach might have something to do with their value about who had the role of
authority in giving knowledge, teachers or students. To put it more precisely, Taiwanese students might believe that teachers were the authority in knowledge, not students. In other words, Taiwanese students believed that teachers should be the one that mainly talked and transmitted knowledge, not the students, and they also tended to believe that they could not learn too much from their peers. That is why some of these Taiwanese participants considered group discussion as a waste of time if their teachers did not give a feedback or summary at the end of it.

A similar conclusion was made by Cortazzi and Jin (1998 & 1999). They found that Chinese students tended to consider that it should be the teacher, not the students, that transmitted knowledge and talked in class. Coelho (1998) also had the same finding that teacher-centered instruction is the dominant approach in Chinese cultures. That was why these Taiwanese participants mentioned that they hoped the group discussion did not occupy too much time in class, and they also insisted that their teachers should give a summary at the end of the group discussion. As a result, we could conclude that these eight Taiwanese students were still more accustomed to the teacher-centered approach because they thought teachers were the authority in knowledge, not students.

Next, based on Perception 23 and 25 in Table 2, it seemed that these eight Taiwanese participants believed that Taiwanese students were uncritical and American students were critical because they found that Taiwanese students rarely challenged teachers, while American students challenged teachers more. The issue of authority in knowledge might also play an important role in this concept. Because Taiwanese students believed that teachers were the authority in knowledge, they tended to accept almost everything from their teachers without questioning them (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin 1998; 1999). Therefore, Taiwanese students rarely questioned and challenged their teachers. Regarding American students’ critical attitudes, American students did not believe that everything their teachers said was correct. They were taught since they were young that it was all right to question or challenge other people’s opinions, including their teachers’ (Brown, 2000; Coelho, 1998). Therefore, that was why American students were more willing to challenge their teachers or the readings. As a result, American students seemed to be more critical. Based on the above, we could infer that authority in knowledge might be a factor that affects both Taiwanese and American students in their critical attitude toward learning.

**Learner Autonomy**

The idea of learner autonomy could be another issue that underlies the differences between these eight Taiwanese participants’ expectations and their experiences in American classrooms. First, it could explain why Taiwanese students were more used to the teacher-centered teaching approach, while American students were more used to the
learner-centered teaching approach. “Learner autonomy” is defined as the capability in which learners have to be in charge of their own learning (Palfrey & Smith, 2003). Learner autonomy is often linked to learners’ independent learning, which is more popular and promoted in an individualistic culture in which learner-centered education is emphasized (Chen, 2000a; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Palfrey & Smith, 2003). In addition, in Western cultures, a primary socialization goal is to help children achieve psychological autonomy and individuality (Chen, Kaspar, Zhang, Wang, and Zheng, 2004). Therefore, in the U.S., a country of individualism, learner-centered approaches are so dominant because the goal of education is to train their students to be more independent. For instance, the activity of group discussion and presentation are the two ways that American teachers usually use to push their students to work on thinking and solving problems on their own. One of the Taiwanese participants, Chen, explained

In my opinion, American students were trained to be more independent and challenging ever since they were children. They were used to activities such as group discussion or giving presentation.

Chinese academic culture, on the other hand, rarely considers teaching students to be autonomous as one of its main goals (Chen, Kaspar, Zhang, Wang, and Zheng, 2004). Therefore, learner autonomy is said to be ethnocentric and rarely promoted in the culture of collectivism, such as the Chinese culture (Chen, 2000a; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). In other words, Taiwanese students tend to be more dependent and rely more on cooperative tactics or on their teachers when it comes to learning (Coelho, 1998; Oetzel, 2002). This might explain why a teacher-centered activity is the dominant approach in Taiwan and why Taiwanese teachers are more inflexible in teaching. Taiwanese students prefer teacher-centered approaches and tended to sit, listen, and wait for their teachers to teach them everything.

Second, based on Perception 23 and 25 in Table 2, these Taiwanese participants seemed to think that Taiwanese students were uncritical and that American students were. The issue of learner autonomy might also play a role in this concept. According to research studies, students from cultures of collectivism tended to prefer teacher-centered instruction and, thus, rely more on their teachers (Chen, 2000a; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). Therefore, Taiwanese students tend to be more dependent in learning and reply more on their teachers (Coelho, 1998; Oetzel, 2002). As a result, Taiwanese students rarely question and challenge their teachers, and tend to accept everything from their teachers (Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999). American students, on the other hand, do not necessarily accept everything from their teachers without questioning.
They tend to be more independent in learning (Chen, 200a; Coelho, 1998; Chen, Kaspar, Zhang, Wang, and Zheng, 2004; Oetzel, 2002). In addition, American students were educated in an environment in which students were allowed to question or challenge other people’s opinions, including those of their teachers’ (Brown, 2000).

Lastly, learner autonomy might also affect learners’ attitudes toward participation in class. Based on Perceptions 22 and 24 in Table 2, there were differences between Taiwanese and American students regarding their participation in class. According to research studies, learners could be more passive in participating in the classroom activities if they were not independent in learning (Ho & Crookhall, 1995). Students coming from cultures of collectivism, in which learner autonomy was not emphasized, tend to be more dependent and passive in participation in the classroom activities (Coelho, 1998; Ho & Crookhall, 1995; Oetzel, 2002). On the contrary, students from cultures of individualism, in which learner autonomy was emphasized, tend to be more independent and active in participating in the classroom activities (Coelho, 1998; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Oetzel, 2002). That might be the reason why Taiwanese students were more passive and American students were more active in class.

The Power Issue

The power issue could be the third factor that underlies the differences between these Taiwanese participants’ expectations about learning and their experiences in American classrooms. First, based on Perceptions 11 and 18 in Table 2, these eight Taiwanese participants seemed to think that American teachers were more easygoing and encouraging, while Taiwanese teachers were more authoritative and serious. The power issue might be the main factor that underlies this perception. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1998; 1999), teachers in Eastern countries enjoyed a high social prestige and have more power than those in Western countries. Coelho (1998) further pointed out that “there is a distinct hierarchy among the generations in many traditional cultures” (p. 181). For instance, students in Taiwan had to stand up when their teachers walked into the classroom. Therefore, it seemed that the job of teaching is considered to be high class and admired by those in other fields in Eastern countries (Smith, 1997; Steven & Stigler, 1992). In addition, students in Eastern countries were taught to respect their teachers since they were children (Cortazzi & Jin, 1998; 1999; Coelho, 1998; Scollon, 1999). Some of the students were even afraid of their teachers. One of the Taiwanese participants, Wang, explained

Taiwanese students, on the contrary, were afraid of teachers since they were taught to listen to teachers and respect them since they were children.
Taiwanese teachers usually had more power and were more authoritative.

Therefore, to Taiwanese students, their teachers seemed to be more authoritative and not that easy to get close to because of the huge power their teachers had. That is, the greater the power of the teacher, the greater the distance between teachers and students.

Second, the power issue might also affect Taiwanese students’ attitudes toward participation in the classroom. Ho and Crookall (1995) directly pointed out that teachers’ power and authority could hinder students’ autonomy, and eventually resulted in students’ passive attitude. In the Chinese culture, teachers enjoyed a high social prestige and have tremendous power (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999, Scollon, 1999). Therefore, Ho and Crookall (1995) argued that the relationship between teachers and students could be similar to that of parents and children. That is, students were afraid of teachers and simply just waited for their teachers’ commands. Eventually, students became more dependent and passive in learning.

Third, the power issue could possibly affect Taiwanese students in another aspect: their critical attitude. Researchers argued that Taiwanese teachers had so much power (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999, Scollon, 1999). In addition, they emphasized that challenging teachers was not encouraged in Chinese culture and students were always taught to respect teachers. That was why Taiwanese students might try to avoid challenging their teachers in class. In addition, due to the tremendous power teachers had in Chinese culture, students might get themselves into trouble once they dared to challenge their teachers (Coelho, 1998). Participant Chen mentioned:

In Taiwan, since elementary school, Taiwanese students were taught to respect teaches and accept everything a teacher taught. Taiwanese students were used to respecting authority, not challenging authority.

Based on the above comment and literature review, we could infer that the factor of power might be an issue that hinders Taiwanese students’ attitudes toward challenging their teachers.

The Face Issue

The face issue could be the fourth factor that underlies the differences between these Taiwanese students’ expectations and their experiences in American classrooms. First, based on Perceptions 22 and 24 in Table 2, it seemed that Taiwanese students were unwilling to participate and ask questions in class, while American students were more willing to talk and participate in class. The face issue plays a crucial role in this. According to research studies, caring about saving face in the classroom is always a big
issue in the cultures of collectivism (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Hofstede, 1990). For example, in Chinese culture, not only students but also teachers really care about maintaining face in the classroom. Therefore, neither Taiwanese students nor teachers will do anything that could risk losing face (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Hofstede, 1990). Asking questions or expressing personal opinions that were too easy or silly could risk losing face and being laughed at by other students. That is why these eight Taiwanese students chose not to ask questions often or express their opinions in class. For example, participant Fong mentioned that she was not inclined to ask questions when she was not well prepared or did not know much about the ideas her teachers were discussing. She explained that she could not ask her teachers questions if she did not understand enough about what her teachers were talking about. Based on this, we could infer that Fong really cared about saving face because she was afraid that her questions or opinions would sound silly due to her poor preparation or understanding and, as a result, other classmates might laugh at her.

Regarding the aspect that American students seemed to be more willing to participate and ask questions in class might also be related to the face issue. Researchers claimed that compared with Eastern countries, face-consciousness in Western countries is weak (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Hofstede, 1990). In other words, students in the USA might not be afraid of losing face and did not care if their opinions sounded silly to other classmates. Therefore, American students were more willing to share their opinions and ask questions in class. According to the interview data, for example, some Taiwanese participants, such as Lin, mentioned that they felt surprised that their American classmates would ask such stupid questions in class. In addition, most Taiwanese participants also mentioned that some American students in their class talked nonsense in the group discussion but that they just did not care.

Based on the above, we could conclude that Taiwanese participants thought that their American classmates were not afraid of losing face because these American students dared to ask some stupid questions or share some nonsense in class. In these Taiwanese students’ opinions, it seemed that American students did not care about losing face in the classroom. American students seemed to regard asking questions or expressing their opinions as the right of students. Asking silly questions or expressing stupid ideas had nothing to do with losing face since Americans might believe that it was natural for student to make mistakes. Therefore, we could conclude that American students did not care if the questions they asked were too silly or easy.

Lastly, the face issue seemed to also affect Taiwanese students in their attitudes toward challenging teachers or authority. According to what have been discussed previously, these eight Taiwanese participants believed that Taiwanese students tended to be more uncritical. Coelho (1998) claimed that students coming from cultures in which both
teachers and students emphasized maintaining face might have problems adjusting to a classroom in which they were asked to take risks, such as to challenge or criticize ideas. In other words, challenging or criticizing ideas in class might have the following two risks --- students’ losing face and making teachers lose face. First, there is a high possibility that students could be laughed at by their peers and, thus, could lose face if they expressed stupid ideas when they are challenging teachers or textbooks (Coelho, 1998). Second, challenging teachers also had another risk --- making teachers lose face if teachers could not handle the situation, such as being unable to answer students’ questions. Since maintaining face and authority is always a big concern for Taiwanese teachers (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999), students might get themselves into the trouble because teachers might think that their students deliberately challenged their authority and intended to make them lose face. Based on the interview data, it is clear that all the Taiwanese participants considered respecting teachers as one of the main aspects of Chinese culture. They also claimed that Taiwanese students were not allowed to challenge authority. In addition, these Taiwanese participants also cared about saving face. Therefore, it seemed that the face issue might be another factor that influenced Taiwanese students’ critical attitudes because they did not want to take risks.

Group Harmony

The issue of group harmony could be the fifth factor that could explain what caused the distance between American and Taiwanese academic cultures based on Taiwanese participants’ expectations and experiences in the USA. Based on Perceptions 22 and 24 in Table 2, Taiwanese students were believed to be more passive while American students were more active in classroom participation and asked more questions. Several research studies pointed out that caring about group harmony more than their own individual benefits might be a key role in this difference. First, Cortazzi & Jin (1998 & 1999) mentioned that in Chinese culture, students seemed to pay more attention to social relationships in the classroom, such as group harmony. Asking too many questions or talking too much in class might be viewed as showing off, which could destroy the group harmony. In addition, Cortazzi & Jin (1998 & 1999) further argued that Chinese students might be afraid that by asking too many questions or talking too much could interrupt teachers’ teaching or take away from the other students’ learning time; therefore, Taiwanese students tended to be unwilling to participate actively in class because they were afraid that they would be criticized by their peers.

Second, similar research studies also mentioned that in the countries of collectivism, group harmony is much more important than an individual member’s benefit (Brown, 2000; Chen, 2000a; Coelho, 1998; Oetzel, 2002). Collectivism, as a value system, emphasizes the welfare and interests of the group, especially when they
are in conflict with those of the individual. The expression of one’s needs or striving for autonomous behaviors is often considered socially unacceptable. Behaviors that may threaten the group functioning and the well-being of the collective are strictly prohibited (Chen, Kaspar, Zhang, Wang, and Zheng, 2004). Coleho (1998) especially identify the idea of public praise relating to the group harmony issue. She explained that the cultures of collectivism emphasized group harmony above rewarding individuals. Therefore, students from this culture might feel uncomfortable when they were singled out to praise or recognize. Consequently, students were passive in participation in class because they might tend to avoid teachers’ approval or praise, so that they would not be criticized as showing off by their peers (Coelho, 1998; Cortazzi & Jin, 1998 & 1999).

The Problems Taiwanese Students Encountered at Penn State

According to Figure 1, it is clear that the first main category of academic cultural differences between Taiwan and the USA results in the problems Taiwanese students encountered at Penn State. To put it more precisely, it is because of the conflicts between Taiwanese students’ expectations about learning and teaching, and their experiences at Penn State that led to their problems while studying at Penn State. Additionally, English proficiency is another factor that gave Taiwanese students problems. Because the focus of this research study is on cultural expectations and mismatch, extensive analysis of English proficiency issue was not undertaken. Therefore, the main purpose of this section is to discuss how and why the conflicts between Taiwanese students’ expectations and their experiences at Penn State, and the factor of their proficiency result in their problems studying at Penn State.

According to the visual model, the main problems these eight Taiwanese students encountered at Penn State are feeling anxious or having pressure attending courses, finding it hard to blend in American culture or make friends with Americans, and feeling uncomfortable in participating and challenging teachers. The reason why these Taiwanese students had these problems was mainly related to their teachers’ course requirements, which asked them to participate actively in the classroom activities. This was different from their previous expectation and beliefs about learning and teaching. Their teachers at Penn State used a lot of learner-centered activities, such as group discussion and presentation, which forced these Taiwanese students to talk and learn more on their own. Their teachers also really cared about their participation in class. As a result, these Taiwanese students were often pushed by their teachers to talk a lot in class. In addition, they were also forced to think on their own and become more independent in learning because their teachers kept pushing them to challenge the material they read. Therefore, base on the above, it is
clear that cross-cultural adjustment problems occurred because it was not easy for these eight Taiwanese students to get used to the teaching approaches their American teachers used at Penn State University in the U.S.

Conclusions

An analysis of the data revealed that eight Taiwanese graduate students in different fields at Penn State tended to be uncritical in learning and passive in participation or sharing their opinions in class. In addition, they also seemed to believe that the teachers’ role should be to transmit knowledge and talk in class. However, these eight Taiwanese students’ attitudes and beliefs about learning and teaching did not absolutely match their experiences in American classrooms. The findings of this study showed that these eight Taiwanese students perceived that their American teachers expected students to be more critical and active in class. In addition, they perceived that American teachers also tended to believe that teachers should not be the only one to transmit knowledge and talk in class.

Five issues related to cultures were identified as the main factors that caused the different cultures of learning between Taiwanese students and their American teachers. These five issues were authority in power, learner autonomy, the power issue, the face issue, and group harmony.

In addition, the findings of this study revealed that the differences between these eight Taiwanese students’ expectations and their experiences in American classrooms negatively affected their cross-cultural adjustment. In order to adjust to the differences, these eight Taiwanese students changed their learning strategies, such as becoming more critical and more active in participation in class. In particular, their prior attitudes and values about learning and teaching were also modified by American academic culture. For example, Taiwanese students began to question the authority of their teachers. They also began to appreciate the activity of the group discussion or presentation.

Based on the findings, this research called for the following suggestions for EFL teachers and researchers both in Taiwan and the U.S.: recognizing the importance of paying attention to the academic cultures in distance for all the teachers in different fields, incorporating the issue of academic cultures in distance into the agenda of language teacher education, and recognizing the role of Taiwanese students as a minor group in the classroom in the U.S. As a result, this study provided a framework that provided an understanding of Taiwanese students’ expectations/beliefs about learning and teaching. It also gave several implications which emphasized the importance of recognizing the role of cultures of learning and the problems of academic cultures in distance for education in the field of TESL as well as in other fields. In addition, this research could also be an innovation with respect to language pedagogy and language learning not only in USA but also in Taiwan.


**Limitations**

This study has certain obvious limitations. One limitation of this research study is the design of the interview questions. Some Taiwanese participants complained that some terms in the interview questions were confusing. In a future study, the investigator should avoid using the terms that might be confusing or ambiguous. Second, since the data of this study was based on self-reports from the participants, the findings may not be very accurate or reflective of actual facts. In other words, the findings of this study were based on the perceptions of Taiwanese students, and what they perceived may not reflect what really occurred in the context. Third, the participants in this study consisted of a certain small group of eight Taiwanese graduate students at Penn State. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalized to the Taiwanese student population as a whole. In the future, there might be a need to explore more of the Taiwanese student population.
References


Pennsylvania State University. University Park, PA.


Appendix A

Interview Questions for Taiwanese Students

1. Compare the expectations you had about the way American teachers teach before coming to the USA and now? Are there any differences? What are they?

2. What are the strengths about the way your American teachers teach? Are there any particular areas you hope your American teachers keep or change? What are they? Why do you think so? How would you like your teachers to change?

3. What teaching approaches your American teachers use are the most of least helpful to you? Why?

4. Do you feel comfortable in your class? Do you feel anxious about attending certain classes? What are those classes? Why?

5. Are there any certain classes that you really want to attend? What are those classes? Why?

6. Do you think you understand the criteria of the class requirements of your American teachers, including the grading criteria? Are there any communication problems between you and your American teachers? If yes, what are they? Why? How do these problems affect you? In addition, in your opinion, do American students have the similar problems with American teachers? Why or why not?

7. Do you notice if there are any differences or similarities between Taiwanese and American students in terms of learning attitudes, styles, or strategies? What are the differences? Why do you think these differences exist? Do these differences affect you or your American teachers? If yes, in what aspect.

8. In your opinion, are there any particular strengths or weaknesses about Taiwanese or American students? What are they?

9. Are there any differences or similarities between American and Taiwanese teachers?
What are the differences? Why do you think these differences exist? Do these differences affect you? If yes, in what way. Additionally, please name a couple of things you would like your Taiwanese teachers to keep or change.