

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS

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Cultural diversity in an ESL/EFL class offers both teacher and students the opportunity to meet and become familiar with various aspects of the students' home countries. However, the resulting gulf between what is considered appropriate or inappropriate in a classroom setting can prove disconcerting if a teacher is not adept at interpreting those behavioral displays. This study was undertaken to compare the classroom etiquette, i.e. appropriate and inappropriate behavioral displays in an instructional setting, across eight countries (Argentina, China, Italy, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Ukraine and Vietnam).

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the various cultures ESL teachers may encounter in their classroom is an essential component in creating a positive classroom environment. If instructors are not sensitive to the cues given by a student, the teacher may misinterpret the actions, behaviors and intentions of that student. Conversely, international students, unaccustomed to American behaviors, will likely encounter similar misunderstandings. Although impossible to have a clear understanding of every culture, from a pedagogical perspective, it is important to have some sense of common behavioral displays made by students in an ESL classroom. This research was inspired by observing international graduate students, all articulate, mature and polite individuals, appear uncomfortable in an American classroom setting. It is important to recognize that if these circumstances existed for highly proficient graduate students accustomed to functioning in culturally diverse settings, the degree of discomfort would likely be magnified for other less-experienced international students. This situation suggests research is needed to explore differences between classroom etiquette in the United States and abroad. This project is an attempt to understand both *what* specific behaviors the international students frequently display and *why* that behavior is present. Only in gaining a deeper sense of these underlying factors can an ESL teacher recognize these seemingly inappropriate or unusual behaviors as manifestations of acceptable cultural norms in the students' home countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When viewing dynamics between international students within the context of a U.S. classroom, many facets are available for discussion. Previous research conducted in the area of classroom etiquette has centered on explaining differences encountered by international students such as

structured, authoritarian classroom environments (Panel, 1987), learning styles (Oxford, Hollaway & Horton-Murillo, 1992), collaborative efforts (Garner, 1991) and silence as a mode of participation (Liu, 2002). Further, much of what has been written about international students has been limited to Asian students (Chu & Kim, 1999; Farver, Kim & Lee, 1995; Paine, 1990; Stevenson & Lee, 1995), while still little research exists on the issues faced by non-mainstream American students (Philips, 1970). This literature mentioned problems faced by international students, including assumptions about the educational setting in the United States, concepts of politeness such as deference, unity and respect and modes of active or passive participation. As noted throughout these studies, some of the difficulties stem from preconceived notions about what is considered appropriate or inappropriate behavior in an American classroom.

Given the diverse nature of an ESL classroom, international students have different assumptions about the educational setting. Tomic (1996) believes it is the teacher's responsibility to have more than a casual understanding of the dynamics found in a diverse grouping. She is a proponent of openly discussing differing opinions held by the students. In her study, she listed some of the challenges one faces in an ESL classroom composed of students with diverse backgrounds. At Richmond College in London, where the study was conducted, the students represented over 80 countries. Tomic noted that as individuals with unique reasons for being in an English language classroom (failing to be admitted to a university in the home country, family expectations, professional purposes), there are mixed attitudes toward the language itself as well as a variety of personal goals. She believes understanding the student's cultural backgrounds also helps the students to better understand one another's behaviors in the classroom.

Concepts about order and structure in the classroom also vary among students. Some students are accustomed to highly structured environments while others have received more student-centered instruction. Panel (1987) compared the cultural values of French and British middle and high school aged students and how those cultural values affected their attitudes and behaviors in the classroom. She found the French's sense of order and structure evident in the classroom. Panel further explained:

The French appear to like order, system and structure [...]. French intellectual life maintains a strong line of descent from classical and Renaissance ideas about symmetry and the imposition of order on the chaos of nature. French pedagogy and classroom learning cannot be understood without an understanding of the French intellectual and rationalist tradition (p. 356).

In accordance with the French preference for order, Panel observed a marked distinction in how the students perceived the role of the teacher. In the English classroom, the authority figures included parents and helpers in addition to the

teacher. These students were exposed to a variety of instructional tools such as videos or play. In the French schools, the focus was on acquiring facts in a methodical manner. A French student's quote reflects his need for the teacher's firm guidance, "I wouldn't like to be able to choose because we don't know what's what" (p. 359). This illustrates the expectation of order and structure, particularly with respect to the role of the teacher, found in a French classroom.

Individual learning styles also influence notions about classroom settings. Students hold both their individual preferences for instructional styles as well as expectations formed by cultural factors. Oxford et al. (1992) focused on language learning styles as they directly relate to culture. Their work included six case-study examples of difficulties experienced by international students studying in the United States. Various types of conflict, coined *style wars*, were defined and suggestions for managing some of these difficult situations, such as altering the teaching style to create teacher-student style matching, were offered. Although the six participants shared about the difficulties they experienced, there was little discussion of the reasons *why* the students found the situations difficult.

Unity, as found in a classroom setting, is valued differently among countries. This holds for both indivisibility among students and the relationships formed between teacher and student. The concept of teamwork, rather than functioning as a separate and distinct unit, alters perceptions about classroom instruction and the dynamics between teacher and student. Garner's (1991) work described the Italian's emphasis on unity among students as demonstrated in a classroom. She wrote:

An important practice of the elementary school is that the teacher advances to the next grade level with her pupils, passing through the first to fifth grade cycle with them. Italians justify this practice as producing closer ties between the teacher and pupils. It forms a bridge between the entirely personalistic atmosphere of the home and the more impersonal setting of the middle and upper school, where there are different teachers for different subjects [...]. This practice of course reflects traditional values in Italian society: personalism, continuity of social fabric and security at the price of limited social and psychological mobility (pp. 336-337).

This demonstrates the importance of unity in classroom settings. Further, it exemplifies the view of education, as both a process and an institution, as collaborative in nature.

Verbally expressing ideas and asking questions during class can prove difficult for students unaccustomed to this form of active participation. Liu (2002) interviewed three Chinese graduate students about their classroom communication patterns. Common to each were their feelings of discomfort in

speaking during classes. Liu noted that none of the three integrated into the classroom discussions in the same manner as native English speakers. Rather, their mode of participation ranged along a continuum from conditional, marginal, to silent. Silent observation and absorbing the knowledge imparted during the lecture were valued. Further, Liu distinguishes between silence as a form of power and subordination. Of the quietest among the three participants, Liu wrote, “The power of silence in Nan’s case lies in the internal processing of information at her own pace, thus allowing her to disagree or agree with the teacher or other students without affecting others and without being affected” (p. 48). This demonstrates that silence may be misinterpreted as lack of interest rather than absorbing new material.

Not only do issues of silence and subordination exist, but some students’ perceptions of their classroom participation may not concur with their instructor’s opinion. These students may presume that their attentive behavior is, in fact, interpreted by the teacher as active participation. However, some research suggests that students and teachers hold different definitions of what constitutes active classroom participation. Chu and Kim (1999) explored the perceptions of Asian and non-Asian students’ classroom participation. In order to accomplish this, three types of data were gathered: written observations by two evaluators, self-assessment questionnaires and follow-up interviews. The findings indicated that Asian students have a narrower definition of classroom participation. While all students listed answering the teacher’s questions and giving feedback in groups as types of participation, the non-Asian students listed additional types of contributions such as being helpful, cooperative and asking the instructor questions. Overall, while the Asian students perceived they were participating fully in class, they were actually contributing less according to the observers.

Values, such as self-control and deference to authority, may cause further confusion between teachers and students. When students practice self-control, the teacher may incorrectly interpret this behavior as inattentiveness or withdrawal. Research (Farver et al., 1995) has linked cultural values with classroom behaviors. In their study, they compared an Anglo-American and Korean-American classroom in a preschool setting. Their study examined the cultural influences on the style of social interaction. They noted that “Korean-American children view teachers as authority figures who are to be respected and to be shown deference. This attitude is fostered early in young Korean children, and they are taught to listen to their teachers’ instructions without question” (p. 1097). The findings indicated that the activities in the Korean-American classrooms focused on memorization, task persistence, effort and a passive involvement in learning. The researchers found the nature of the activities to be in accordance with the Korean values of social harmony, group identity and self-control.

Research in the area of classroom dynamics includes not only international students, but also American students who do not come from mainstream backgrounds. Philips (1970) wrote extensively about the difficulties faced by children from the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in

central Oregon who are educated away from the reservation in the public school system. She found that these students performed exceedingly well when given the opportunity to work as a group and, conversely, resisted when asked to participate on an individual basis. Their struggle lay primarily in the mode of instruction. Philips noted “the contexts described here in which learning takes place can be perceived as an idealized sequence of three steps: (1) observation, which of course includes listening; (2) supervised participation; and (3) private, self-initiated self-testing” (p. 387). The Warm Springs Indian children had been raised to learn by observation rather than direct instruction and felt pressured when asked to display their knowledge in front of a group rather than practice privately before demonstrating proficiency. Philips further described how the Warm Springs children were unaccustomed to learning from their own mistakes, particularly in front of other students. She noted that “In the classroom, the processes of *acquisition* of knowledge and *demonstration* of knowledge are collapsed into the single act of answering questions or reciting when called upon to do so by the teacher, particularly in the lower grades” (p. 388). This study illuminates the fact that even students born in the United States face issues of cultural differences in educational settings. Further, students who are required to perform in class may do so at the expense of insightful reflection.

Given the numerous instances of potential cultural clashes between teachers and international students, further research is needed to unveil the underlying values and assumptions held by students. Problematic occurrences are fostered by misunderstandings about appropriate classroom behaviors. In order to shed light on some of these behaviors and assumptions, the following study examines what eight international students view as acceptable or unacceptable classroom behavior.

METHODS

Participants

Eight international students from a major university in the American southwest were surveyed about classroom etiquette in their home country. All eight participants were graduate students taking coursework in Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language. Participants originated from Argentina, China, Italy, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Ukraine and Vietnam. Length of stay in the United States ranged from five months to ten years. The participants ranged in age from early twenties to mid-fifties. The reasons for their stay in the United States varied from the sole purpose of earning a graduate degree, relocating for political reasons and marriage to an American citizen. All were advanced speakers of English and had completed, at minimum, one semester of graduate coursework. Of the eight participants, two (from Italy and Taiwan) subsequently returned to their home countries. The remaining six (from Argentina, China, Japan, Korea, the Ukraine and Vietnam) either continued their educational studies in doctoral programs or have entered the professional arena.

Research Design

Data collection consisted of a three-part system in which participants completed a questionnaire that ranked particular behaviors, answered open-ended questions and participated in one-on-one interviews. In the questionnaire phase, the participants, using a Likert-scale, ranked ten behaviors from 1 (acceptable behavior) to 5 (unacceptable behavior). Questions covered topics such as cheating, arriving late to class, forms of addressing the professor and methods used to clarify questions during class (See Appendix Part 1). The participants evaluated the behaviors based on how socially acceptable those actions would be in their home countries within the context of a college or university setting.

Eight open-ended questions were designed to elicit responses to describe in greater detail the classroom environment in the participants' native countries (see Appendix 1 Part 2). These responses allowed the participants to elaborate on methods used to seek clarification, ways to show respect, and to further illustrate other classroom dynamics such as error correction and discipline.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with the participants after the questionnaire had been completed. Participants were encouraged to comment further on their survey responses. Responses were recorded in field notes that later provided the interviewer the opportunity to clarify vague responses and to further discuss key issues.

Results

No two participants responded in a similar manner to all questions (see Table 1). All respondents indicated that consuming food or beverages in class constituted inappropriate behavior. Similarly, in the case of using the professor's first name, all participants unanimously classified this as unacceptable (5).

No significant differences were noted between participants' attitudes towards arriving three or seven minutes late to class. All respondents, except the Chinese participant, ranked them either the same or one numerical value higher (toward unacceptable). The respondent from China evaluated a three-minute arrival with a score of three (3); however, she considered arriving seven minutes late to be highly unacceptable (5) behavior for a student.

No distinct pattern was noted between two seemingly related questions about asking the professor questions during class and offering personal comments/views during class. All respondents, except the participant from Italy, deemed asking questions during class as acceptable to moderately acceptable. Three trends were noted when comparing the two questions on classroom participation: deemed equally acceptable, more acceptable, or less acceptable, respectively. While some participants (from Korea, Ukraine, Italy) evaluated the two behaviors the same, three (from Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam) considered offering comments more offensive, while two (from Argentina and China) assigned lower rankings. Table 1 below presents the results obtained.

Table 1: Participants' Perception of Acceptability of Various Classroom Behaviors.

	Acceptable			Unacceptable	
	1	2	3	4	5
Asking the professor questions during class	K, V	A	C, J, T, U		I
Eating/drinking during class					A, C, I, J, K, T, U, V
Cheating on an exam	T		A	U	C, I, J, K, V
Leaving class to use the restroom	A	U	C, I, K, V	T	J
Arriving three (3) minutes late to class	A, K	I	C, U, V	T	J
Arriving seven (7) minutes late to class	K	A	I, U	V	C, J, T
Offering personal comments/views during class	A, C, K	V	U		I, J, T
Using the professor's first name					A, C, I, J, K, T, U, V
Responding "I don't know" to a question	J, K	C, T	I, V	U	A
Whispering to a classmate for clarification	A, K	C, I, T	U	J	V
Legend: A=Argentina, C=China, I=Italy, J=Japan, K=Korea, T=Taiwan, U=Ukraine, V=Vietnam					

While the written survey provides insight into the participants' categorical determinations of appropriateness of particular behaviors, the underlying reasons why those determinations were made is not revealed. In order to appreciate the rationale for the responses, one on one interviews were conducted with the participants. The following section illustrates the participants' personal recollections of their educational experiences.

DISCUSSION

In addition to the broad array of responses in the questionnaire, the comments shared during the interview process varied as well. Participants vividly recalled memories from their undergraduate studies and were eager to share their own stories. Recounting their experiences provided a greater understanding of why the participants responded as they did in the questionnaire. During the interview process, they recollected their understanding of what was deemed acceptable or unacceptable classroom behavior. In addition, the participants recalled personal experiences when either they or other classmates had violated those norms and further illustrated the consequences of those actions.

Asking the professor questions during class time

The participants from China, Taiwan, Italy, Argentina and the Ukraine said they would *never or rarely* ask a question during class time. This was considered impolite and disrespectful classroom behavior. Additionally, this interactive forum was structured differently from the classrooms in their home countries, thereby creating discomfort in this unfamiliar, student-centered environment. According to the participants, the alternatives in a Chinese or Taiwanese class would be to ask other students during the lecture or wait until the class has ended and ask the professor. The Taiwanese participant indicated to her teacher that she did not understand the material by whispering to her classmate. She explained that if enough students whisper, then the teacher knows the majority of students are confused and can choose to revisit the material. The graduate student from China explained:

The teacher does confirm that the material is understood and asks if there are any questions, but the students pretend they understand everything even if they don't. It is acceptable to ask another student because we will hesitate to ask the professor for clarification since it makes us lose face.

This method of indirect communication avoids an affront to the professor and embarrassment by the student. Further, asking for clarification may indicate to the professor that the student believes *the teacher* is at fault and has not provided a clear explanation.

The student from China recalled one occasion when a student asked a question during class time. The professor looked at his watch and told the students that whole class would be detained one minute for every minute required for explanation. He further scolded the student by saying the student should calculate how much *total* time was actually wasted. According to the professor, one minute of explanation is not equal to one minute of wasted time, but rather thirty minutes of time since there are thirty students in this class. Her memory of this event coincides with the other studies in which Chinese teachers were described as formal, serious, stuffy and monotonous

(Su, Su & Goldstein, 1994, p. 260). Recollections made by the Chinese participant further depict Chinese teachers as authority figures who did not wish to be distracted during classroom lectures.

According to the participant from the Ukraine, a student may ask questions, but will hesitate before doing so. She recounted that she would wait until she felt very confused before raising her hand. Asking a question is a poor reflection on the student. The participant explained, "If you don't understand the material covered, it's usually considered your fault, and you don't get any clarification from the professor." As in the story told by the Chinese participant, the burden to obtain clarification is placed on the student outside of the classroom.

Class size was another deterrent to asking a professor questions during class time. The Italian participant described the university environment as intimidating. She explained that, in Italy, the classes at the university level are very large and, therefore, prohibit students from asking questions during class. Contact is further limited because professors in Italy do not hold office hours. A professor may have an assistant, but this is only occasionally the case. A student may ask to meet with the assistant, but this is at the instructor's discretion. Both the Italian and Taiwanese participants explained that they were expected to resolve questions by themselves. However, a difference between the two lies in the interaction between students. In Taiwan, students frequently turn to one another for assistance. Since all information must be gleaned from a lecture in an Italian university setting, one student would never interrupt their classmate for clarification during the lecture. However, helping one another outside of class is greatly encouraged. This corroborates the earlier studies on Italian classrooms which found that students valued unity and collaborative efforts (Garner, 1991).

The Argentinean informant identified two factors that make asking questions prohibitive. First, the student felt she bothered the professor by asking questions. The professor's lecture is already planned out for the class period, therefore instructors should not be asked to deviate from their pre-planned lecture. The participant described the severity as, "a sin to ask a question." Nor do students communicate by e-mail with their teachers as this is also considered a bother to the professor. Secondly, should a student be brave enough to ask a question, they do not wish to appear ignorant in front of their classmates. "There's peer pressure and there's the pride not to make stupid questions."

The survey participants from Korea, Vietnam, Japan described an environment similar to the American classroom. Students raise their hands and wait for the teacher to call on them. It is not necessary to wait until the end of class to ask questions. In Vietnam, students may use an alternative method to raising a hand. Instead, the student may look around the classroom and appear confused. This movement of the head suggests the student is seeking further clarification.

For the participants from China, Taiwan, Italy, Argentina and the Ukraine the custom of asking questions was not considered an additional mode

of access to their professors' knowledge. Rather, they expressed that it served as a limitation since American students clarified unclear points, but these international students were not comfortable operating in a similar manner. Not only was the act of raising one's hand unfamiliar, but also the overall structure of the interactive classroom proved intimidating.

Using the professors' first name

All of the participants found using a first name to address a professor to be awkward. Of those surveyed, all eight described using the professor's first name as inappropriate behavior and all selected the highest score of 5 (unacceptable). In the Chinese and Italian languages, there are different terms for addressing the professor. In China, Lecturers or Teaching Assistants are called by their last name followed by the title *Lao Shi*. Professors or Associate Professors are addressed by their last name and title accompanied by the title *Jiao Shou*. In addition to sensitivity in title usage, the Chinese informant explained that students must show deference to one's professor by walking one or two steps behind rather than side by side.

Instead of using titles to show respect in the Ukraine, using both the first and last name of the professor indicates respect. The proper order when addressing someone is to use the first name followed by his or her father's last name. This dual-name format must be used every time the student addresses the instructor.

In Italy, the titles used to address a university professor vary according to the position held by the professor. Lecturers and Researchers are referred to as *Dottore* or *Dottoressa*, depending on whether the person addressed is male or female, respectively. Associate Professors and Professors are addressed as *Professore* or *Professoressa*. The students are responsible for knowing the position held and would insult an Associate Professor or Professor by calling him or her by the lesser title of *Dottore* or *Dottoressa*.

None of the participants felt that this was a custom they would soon adopt as it violated norms of politeness and appeared disrespectful. To the participants, this meant that native English speakers who used the professors' first name achieved a greater level of comfort and intimacy with their instructors that international students would never attain. The decision to address a professor with the more polite form served as a limitation since these relationships would remain at a more formal level with professors. Presumably, students who have strong bonds with their professors receive invaluable advice and guidance that others may not have the benefit of receiving. Whether this is a valid claim remains unresolved; however, for the participants, the imbalance between native English speakers and international students with regard to cultivating academic relationships appeared problematic.

Cheating on an exam

Six participants rated cheating on an exam with a 5 (unacceptable). The Argentinean participant gave the question a 3 (moderate). She explained

that students do not see cheating as anything bad, but the teachers do. In fact, there is an obligation to help one's fellow students on tests and to pass along any information such as copies of previous exams or knowledge about which questions will be on an exam.

In Taiwan, there is a marked distinction between the college environment and a prestigious university. In a college environment, the students will receive terminal degrees and enter the work force. Although the colleges are at a post-high school level, the purpose is more closely related to that of a vocational school. The institutions need to move the students through the curriculum so that new incoming students fill the vacancies. The Taiwanese informant shared that sometimes her professors would even read or leave the classroom during the exam. Given the importance of passing exams, the inherent structure of the testing system allows for cheating to occur. This 'ostrich in the sand' approach is a key component of classroom order and is understood by teachers and students alike. The result of this is a high pass rate. In a classroom setting in which the teacher's actions allow for cheating to occur, all students will successfully pass the requisite exams and make space available for the new students. Without the established structural element, feigned ignorance, the Taiwanese educational system would not achieve its goal of successfully producing numerous program graduates.

Use of discipline in the classroom

During the data collection interview phase of the study, participants used the terms 'shouting' and 'using silence' most frequently when describing how their teachers maintained order in the classroom. In Taiwan, corporal punishment was outlawed five years ago; however, parents of young college students give their permission for the teacher to use any method of discipline they so choose. The Chinese informant recalled that her teachers would stop talking in order for the class to quiet down and re-focus their attention on the teacher. This emphasis on discipline starts at an early age. Vaughan (1993) describes guidance and discipline in an elementary Chinese classroom:

Respect for the teacher and prompt, unquestioning obedience are expected. They generally appear to be orderly, attentive, hard working and eager to please the teacher. I saw [...] no cases of disrespect or lack of prompt obedience to the teacher's requests [...]. Some of the guidance and discipline methods differ from standard practices in the United States (p. 199).

Further, if teachers resort to shouting, they are considered weak. That instructor will lose the students' respect.

The Vietnamese participant explained that a Vietnamese teacher does not use classroom time to discipline a student. The student must leave the classroom if they are disrespectful and wait in the hallway until the teacher has finished lecturing.

Error correction

Five participants, all from Asian countries, expressed a positive feeling toward error correction, even if it were embarrassing or uncomfortable at the time. Most sentiments expressed contained positive adjectives such as acceptable, good and nice. All participants felt that the teacher's job was to make the student better and error correction was the manner in which to do that. They considered the educational experience to be a time for self-improvement. The Japanese participant shared a proverb which says, "You only get embarrassed once. It stays with you forever, so you won't make the same mistake again." Referring to teachers in China, Vaughan (1993) described discipline as a positive influence in an individual's development:

Teachers do not appear concerned about any possible psychological harm resulting from these practices, such as lowered self-esteem. Rather, they believe such corrections will help the child work harder so as to avoid future mistakes (p. 200).

These shared recollections portray error correction as a venue for personal growth. As evidenced in both the participants' responses and earlier research, this suggests that international students studying in an American classroom may wish to be corrected.

On the other hand, the Italian participant viewed error correction as negative. She explained that error correction in the university environment occurs exclusively during final exams. Since the classes are so large, one of the only instances of interpersonal communication is during the exam period. All exams are oral; hence, any correction expressed indicates that the professor disagrees with the student's position. If enough instances of correction take place, the student is asked to leave the oral exam and must reschedule at a later time or date. Being asked to return at another time is particularly stressful for the student because the exams are scheduled over several days. Students are assigned numbers and must wait until their number is called. They wait in large auditoriums from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. The Italian respondent recalled finally being called into the exam room at 6:30 p.m. at the end of the third day. Hence, receiving any error correction during the exam stage indicates the possibility of repeating this grueling exam process over again.

Depending on the pedagogical approach embraced by the teacher, overt correction may or may not take place in all classrooms. Students who are corrected may view this as facilitating the learning process (Oxford et al., 1992), receiving guidance and encouragement (Garner, 1991), being chided, or at some point along this continuum. Conversely, if students are not corrected, they may infer that they are producing correct English, interpret the absence of corrective action as a lack of interest or authority on the part of the instructor (Planel, 1987), or feel relieved that they are not corrected in front of classmates. This third view, shared by some members of the Warm Springs Reservation (Philips, 1970), allows for alternate modes for demonstrating

proficiency. These modes allow students to initiate participation at a time when they feel sufficiently prepared to demonstrate their proficiency rather than at the instructors' request. The many views on error correction illustrate the complex dynamics evident in the multicultural classroom.

Promptness

All study participants did not view arriving on time to class as equally important. The Japanese informant described the protocol for late arrivals as quite formal. She explained that if students arrive late to class, they may not enter the classroom without the teacher's permission. The students must knock on the door and wait for the professor to decide if they may enter the classroom. The participant said she usually arrives five to eight minutes before class starts. The Chinese participant explained that in her country, "being on time is greatly valued and you will be embarrassed while everyone is looking at you." In Argentina, Italy and Korea a late arrival would not offend cultural values. Again, due to the large class size in the Italian universities, a late arrival is not noticed.

It is important to note that not all Asian participants responded in a similar manner to the question about promptness. The participants from China, Japan, Taiwan and Vietnam viewed tardiness as moderately (3) to very unacceptable (5). However, the Korean participant scored arriving both three and seven minutes late as acceptable (1). These varied responses discount the notion of all Asian students as alike. This narrow portrayal of Asian students does not account for different personalities and social bearings (Farver et al., 1995), individual learning styles (Oxford et al., 1992) and approaches to classroom participation (Chu & Kim, 1999; Liu, 2002). This illustration of Asian students as having similar personalities is not limited to only the classroom setting. On a broader scale, Asian students are frequently profiled as a homogeneous group without regard to cultural, linguistic, geographical and historical differences.

Greatest Difference between Classroom Etiquette/Environment

When asked what the participant found the most surprising/interesting/shocking about an American classroom, each gave a different answer. The Taiwanese participant was most surprised when she saw students eating in the classroom. "That's so weird," she said. Only the teacher may drink during class time. One student is even assigned to prepare the professor's tea each semester. The teacher specifies how they would like the tea prepared; hot or cold, black or green. The designated student will have the tea waiting for the professor. They will sip the tea only when the students are engaged in work on their own. Their back is normally turned to the students when sipping the tea.

The Italian participant was shocked the first time a professor called her by name. Outside of the formal oral exam environment, she had never been addressed by a professor, let alone referred to by name. Instead of feeling flattered, she expressed that it made her feel uncomfortable. She felt she had

lost her privacy. She described her feelings of discomfort as, “against [her] habit.”

The informality and ability to ask questions was a change for the Argentinean participant. She shared that she is just starting to raise her hand, but struggles because she fears she will be reprimanded. As mentioned earlier, she used the word ‘sin’ to describe asking a question in class.

The Chinese participant’s greatest area of difficulty was with the classroom discussions in which the students were expected to take part. She felt that, “In China, the professors do most of the work, but here the students do most of the work.” When asked if she learned from her classmate’s contributions, she expressed that she did not. She came to “learn from a professor not another student.” This sentiment is mirrored in Chan’s (1999) illustration of the Chinese learner’s expectations and learning styles which have been influenced by Chinese culture. She explained:

Confucianism encourages the Chinese to respect hierarchical relationships between individuals so that the teachers are expected to teach as well as guide students. Many would feel that ineffective teaching is taking place if they are continually asked in class to express their opinions or to solve a problem by themselves (p. 301).

Therefore, the teacher is viewed as the authority figure who guides the class’s progress. Given this hierarchical structure, students rarely question this authority in China.

In Japan, all assignments are completed on an individual level. The Japanese participant found it very difficult to work with other students on group projects. She felt that she learned much more when she worked on her own and that she frequently encountered an uneven distribution of effort within the group. She found this particularly true at the graduate level where, “the students are very strong-minded. We had bad group dynamics.” She found this to be true even when all the group members were Japanese.

The Vietnamese native welcomed the American teacher’s friendliness. He felt very encouraged by many of his teachers and attributes their outgoing personalities to his academic success. He also admires it when teachers admit that they do not know an answer. In Vietnam, the teacher is a “model person and must know everything.” As a result, a professor does not admit to weaknesses, such as not knowing material. This is another source of inspiration for him since he does not feel the burden of having to know everything covered in class.

The difference in the style of dress surprised the Korean respondent. In her home country, professors always wear suits. She explained that there is a great emphasis on the formality of dress as a general rule in Korea. Even high school teachers are required to wear ties. The casual clothing of the American students is also different from the Korean students’ mode of dress. She shared that she is reminded of bedroom slippers when she sees the

footwear the Americans wear. However, she views this difference as a positive reflection on the “simple and easy life” enjoyed in this country.

The participant from the Ukraine had never heard a professor addressed by his or her first name before she came to the United States. She does not think she will “ever, ever call a teacher by their first name. Not until I die would I do this.”

These varied responses call attention to the diverse assumptions made by international students. As evidenced by the stories shared by the participants, these international students hold different expectations about classroom order and structure (cheating, discipline, error correction), cultural values of deference, unity and respect (forms of address, promptness) and active participation (asking questions). These notions about classroom dynamics illustrate how misinterpretations about behaviors easily and readily occur. The only hope for bridging these misunderstandings is for teachers and students to become more sensitive to the multitude of factors at play.

CONCLUSION

Most ESL classrooms are comprised of a markedly diverse student population. As seen in the varied responses and personal recollections, each member of an ESL classroom brings their own understandings and expectations of what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate in a classroom. Based on these understandings, students will behave accordingly. Only after time and exposure to American classrooms, might these behaviors begin to change. Further, each student will adapt in a unique manner and at his or her own pace, if at all. However, during this transitional period, teachers may brand international students as rude, inconsiderate, or inattentive. Since many instructors include participation as one factor when evaluating student performance and calculating final grades, points for lack of participation (as viewed by the instructor) may be deducted. As a result, these misunderstandings can adversely affect the students’ academic standing. These difficulties extend to awkward interactions with professors, assumptions about cheating and students’ expectations about error correction and forms of discipline.

It is this myriad of potential difficulties (misinterpretations of behaviors and the resulting detrimental effect on grades) that necessitates further research into the area of classroom etiquette. While this study presents the perspectives of eight international students, the number of participants is quite limited. Subsequent studies using a larger pool of participants would expand and enrich our insight into the experiences of our non-native students. A second limitation of this study is that only one student from each country was interviewed. Gathering insight from several members of the same country would offer a broader representation of their learning backgrounds. Understanding multiple perspectives, whether shared or dissimilar, offer ESL teachers a keener sense of the range of possible learning experiences.

In addition, a comparison of Asian countries may help to dispel the myth that *all* Asians form a homogeneous group. At present, the literature portrays the Asian community as a single, cohesive entity. This overgeneralization misleads the instructional community to make false presumptions. As evidenced in this study, no two Asian participants responded in a similar manner to the study questions. Therefore, it follows that students' classroom behaviors cannot be interpreted in the same manner. A comprehensive, contrastive study, with a limited scope of only Asian cultures, could prove useful in providing background into the variety of the cultural norms that influence classroom behavior.

With more extensive work in this area, teachers will become more capable of understanding and even appreciating, the multitude of behaviors manifested in their classrooms. With this insight, teachers then have a starting point for discussion with their students about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in American classrooms. Empowering students with this knowledge will ease the transition in adapting to a new environment, thereby benefiting both students and teachers. Rather than placing an additional instructional burden on teachers, discussing these issues will create a more positive classroom environment, which will, in turn, enhance learning.

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APPENDIX I

Survey of Classroom Etiquette

My home country is _____

Part 1 - Please rate the following in-class behaviors from: Acceptable (1) to Unacceptable (5). Answer as if you were a student in your home country.

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Asking the professor questions during class time. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Eating/drinking during class |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Cheating on an exam |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Leaving the classroom to use the restroom |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Arriving three (3) minutes late to class |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Arriving seven (7) minutes late to class |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Offering your personal comments/views during classroom discussion |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Using the professor's first name |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Responding "I don't know" to a question |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Whispering to a classmate for clarification |

Part 2 – General questions

- 1) How do you demonstrate to the teacher that you are attentive? Is this even important to do?
- 2) What kind of discipline is used in the classroom?
- 3) If you do not understand something in class, how do you get clarification? Does the teacher confirm that the material is understood by all?
- 4) How do you feel about direct error correction?
- 5) How do you show your teacher respect?
- 6) What indicators tell you that class has begun/ended?
- 7) Is humor used in the classroom?