

## Explaining Cultural Stereotypes in TESOL

by Scott Freiberger

Many teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) professionals would agree that educators should not hold outdated, biased views (Pennycook, 1994, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003). There is a reason, however, that preconceived notions regarding established patterns of behavior and thinking persist, and explains why such patterns should be used by TESOL professionals to better understand the cultural backgrounds and learning styles of their Chinese-speaking students. A Chinese expression advises, “If a person teaches me for one day, I will respect that person for my entire life *as a father* [italics mine].” This saying encapsulates the deeply ingrained respect for teachers in Chinese culture that has existed for over 5,000 years.

In Asia, Chinese teachers tend to be detail-oriented and explain material explicitly. Students do not generally raise their hand, and contribute only if called upon; it is just recently that teachers have been requesting students to respond. Moreover, the material taught in Asia tends to be at an advanced level compared with what is done in the West.

Instructors in China also generally teach to the test, so in addition to a barrage of criterion-referenced exams, students must grasp the material, excel on each related test, and move on to the next, more advanced topic. Thus, because students must learn a considerable amount of material in a relatively short amount of time, they do not have time to challenge authority, think critically, or actively participate because instruction is not interactive. In addition, students must also pass competitive standardized tests to enter junior high school, high school, and college.

A well-known Chinese expression, “Of only three people, one could be your teacher,” stems from a story in which Confucius noted that anyone, regardless of educational background or social status, could inspire you that way. The main idea is one of respect, because you never know where you may glean knowledge and valuable insight. This quote has nothing to do with challenging authority, as some may misinterpret. Confucius, the eternal teacher, emphasized respect for all, regardless of economic or social status, and Confucian ideology prevails in China and on Taiwan.

Yet education in the same region may vary. Students in Hong Kong, for instance, are exposed to a combination of Eastern and Western educational styles. This is not the case in China or on Taiwan, where an Eastern style dominates. Contrary to how some TESOL educators may oversimplify in their teaching approaches, however, China and India should not be grouped into an “Asian” category. Chinese culture, for instance, has been influenced by a combination of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism for over 5,000 years, which helps to explain Chinese and Taiwanese students’ deep respect for educators. India, on the other hand, has been influenced by Buddhism, but not by Daoism, which includes the teachings of “old master” Laozi and Zhuangzi, an influential Chinese philosopher. China and Taiwan have been strongly influenced by Confucianism, with its influential works by Confucius, the eternal teacher, and Mencius, a revered Chinese scholar and arguably the most famous Confucian disciple. The absence of these enduring Chinese cultural influences in India may help to explain the student insubordination some educators may encounter there.

There is a reason TESOL professionals have preconceived notions about how their ESL students may act and behave based on country of origin: many of these fixed assumptions ring true. This is not to say that international students may not behave differently if they are studying in the West. If ELLs are spending thousands of dollars to relocate and enroll and then witness Western students acting less cautiously, they may indeed resolve to participate more and act differently in classes in the West compared with how they may behave in their native countries.

Chinese students use chopsticks to eat in China and on Taiwan, but if they use a fork and spoon in the West, this does not mean that they have lost their culture. People change their habits to adapt to the local environment. When they return to Asia, they will use chopsticks again; the culture does not disappear. As TESOL professionals, it is important to remember that while all ESL students may speak the same L1 or even come from the same countries, each student may provide a unique, thoughtful response if called upon in class. And in light of what preconceived notions we may have about students from different cultural backgrounds, some of these responses may be unexpected.

## References

Pennycook, A. (1994). The cultural politics of English as an international language. London: Longman. As cited in Kumaravadivelu, B. (Winter, 2003). Problematizing cultural stereotypes in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 709–719.

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