# Unlearning and Relearning: Chinese Students in a New Zealand First Year Undergraduate Class

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## ABSTRACT

*For almost two decades New Zealand's tertiary institutions experienced growth in international student enrolments with Chinese students making up the largest proportion of the numbers. Many of these students experience 'culture shock' both inside and outside of the classroom. To succeed they need to 'unlearn' previous ways of studying and adjust to the new academic requirements. This study reports the experience of Chinese undergraduates in a first year management paper as they encountered different styles of lecturing, group work, tutorials and an emphasis on application rather than textbook based study. Data were obtained from observations of lectures and tutorials, and from student and lecturer interviews. The findings highlight the difficulties many students faced – meeting written and spoken English requirements, dealing with challenging internal assessments and different styles of lecturing. For many, the paper was a major hurdle to overcome in their studies in New Zealand.*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the Chinese economy during the last two decades saw many Chinese students going overseas to study in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (Tarling, 2009). New Zealand shared in this growth, enjoying a reputation as a provider of international education, offering good study opportunities and support services, and delivered in a relatively safe environment. Since the early 1990s, New Zealand's tertiary institutions experienced rapid growth in the number of international students with Chinese students making up the bulk of this growth. By 2009, there were 20,780 Chinese students out of the 93,505 international enrolments in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The University of Waikato experienced similar growth. By 2009, Chinese students made up 44% of the international student enrolments at the University with the majority enrolling in the Waikato Management School (WMS) (University of Waikato, 2009). These students were soon, however, confronted

not only by significant cultural challenges in Aotearoa New Zealand but also very different teaching models.

The study reports the experience of a sample of Chinese undergraduates in their first semester in a compulsory introductory management studies paper. It captures the students' experiences as they confronted new learning situations – different styles of lecturing, participative tutorials, case studies and an emphasis on application rather than simply textbook based study.

The purpose of the introductory management paper is for students to explore the management of organisations. The paper includes both internal assessment (60%) and external assessment (40%). The internal component includes a variety of assignments: group work, where students go into the business community to interview a manager leading to a group report; presentation; and, an individual reflective paper. Tutorials, random in-class quizzes, and a case analysis make up the rest of the internal assessment. The external component involves a three-hour examination where 50% of the mark is given over to the analysis of a case study. The paper also makes use of e-learning technology with all lectures being videoed and made available to students within an hour of the lecture via the School's e-communication platform. The paper is designated as 'writing intensive' requiring students to have well-developed writing skills as well as sound computer literacy skills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Studying in a different country presents international students not only with cultural challenges but also different academic demands (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). The ability of international students to successfully adjust to these demands includes their proficiency in English, their ability to cope with different approaches to teaching, moving from teacher-dependent to autonomous learner status, and dealing with psycho-social cultural pressures.

### The English language barrier

The English language skills of international students have received considerable attention in the literature. Even when they have acquired the IELTS score of 6.0 to enable them to enrol in a New Zealand tertiary institution, many students still experience difficulties, suggesting that the IELTS requirement does not prepare them well enough for their studies (Jepson, Turner & Calway, 2002). For Chinese students, difficulties with the English medium can be traced to the teaching of English in China where 'the Chinese EFL teacher … adheres to the prescribed textbook, analysing texts … sentence by sentence.' (Wang 2009, p. 247). The heavy emphasis in China on written English often results in Chinese students' spoken English not being well developed (Zhang & Brunton, 1999). Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) found that the better the students' English language skills, particularly their spoken English, the more effective the adjustment will be. Campbell and Li's (2008) study of international students who had studied in New Zealand for at least a year found that Chinese students spent more time with the English dictionary in the library than they did studying the content of the course.

**Approaches to teaching**

Chinese students are likely to have experienced a narrow range of approaches to teaching, primarily formal teacher-centered and teacher-directed lectures (Carter, 2006). They come from learning situations where they are expected to 'uncritically accept the instructor's lecture or the fact in a textbook instead of presenting their own thoughts' (Zhao & McDougall, 2008, p. 64). As a result, they expect teachers to be the providers of knowledge where their role is to passively 'obey, and not challenge; to listen, absorb and then regurgitate when asked' (Littlewood, 1996). Although they are expected to actively engage with the academic content of their studies they are offered few opportunities to engage actively in the learning processes (Ma, 2007).

China's traditional Confucian values, such as harmony, co-operation and 'face' also influence learning leading to students who 'prefer not to speak out in open response to questions' (Guo & Zhang, 2004, p. 20). In such a context, challenging the teacher is considered inappropriate and likely to lead to 'loss of face' (Ministry of Education, 2001). Jin and Cortazzi (2006) found that spontaneous oral activities were rare in the Chinese classroom with the result that Chinese students often appeared passive. Cheng (2004) argues, however, that when 'Asian students have fewer problems with language … they are likely to take active roles in class' (p. 44).

In contrast, the education that international students encounter in the West draws on a wide range of approaches which are 'student-centered, meaning focused, competence-orientated and … include tutorials, workshops and/or seminars' (Zhou, 2008, p. 1). In these situations the role of the teachers is to 'facilitate the student-student communication process through effective learning tasks' (Hu, 2010, p. 78).

**Learner autonomy**

Chinese students learn to respect their teachers as authority figures where, as previously mentioned, asking questions might be interpreted as a challenge to the teacher, resulting in a loss of face (Wen & Clement, 2003). The result is that students learn to depend on direction from the teacher (Flowerdew, 1998; Gao, 2006). Western education places value on learner autonomy and the acquisition of critical thinking skills which Holec (1981) defines as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p. 3). Claxton (2002) maintains that autonomous learners are less likely to accept uncritically what they are told. Harmer (2007) maintains that New Zealand students are encouraged to 'take responsibility for their own learning' (p. 396) while Yang, Li and Sligo (2008) and Camborne (1988) maintain that tertiary students are encouraged to be independent, critical thinkers and to value working collaboratively. When confronted with learning situations that value these attributes, Chinese students often struggle.

**Assessment criteria**

The literature distinguishes between formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is concerned with improving the processes and outcomes of learning (Blanchard, 2009). It encompasses all the activities undertaken by learners and teachers for enhancing the attainment of students and raising standards of achievement (Black & William, 1998). It is regarded as a powerful way for enhancing student learning (Wang & Lê, 2006).

Summative assessment by contrast takes place at set points, assessing students' progress in achieving accepted criteria. Chinese education relies heavily on this type of assessment with tests and examinations where 'academic success depends heavily on memorisation and recall of class material' (Howson, 2002, p. 97).

**Psycho-social cultural issues**

International students frequently encounter 'culture shock' both in the society they join and in their studies, where they find it difficult to settle and focus (McLaren, 1998). Holmes (2004) maintains that the international students in her study, including Chinese students, 'had little knowledge of New Zealand society, culture, or education before beginning their studies. Upon arrival they all experienced various degrees of reality shock' (p. 298). Their behaviour in their studies, for example passivity, often reflects their desire to avoid failure and not lose 'face'. A sense of academic helplessness and disengagement occurs when students believe there is nothing they can do to avoid failing (Martin, 2010).

Studying in a strange country, with different cultural norms and language barriers, often leads international students to experience loneliness. Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000) found that students who interact well with host nationals often reported decreased feelings of loneliness.

A New Zealand survey found that Chinese international students had the lowest levels of life satisfaction amongst country of origin groups and were least satisfied with aspects of their academic progress (Ministry of Education, 2009).

## METHOD

This study set out to explore two questions:

1) How did Chinese students cope with the academic demands of the compulsory paper?
2) What might be done to facilitate Chinese student learning and what implications might this have for the institution?

**Sample**

Twenty-two Chinese first-year undergraduates took part in the study, chosen randomly from the 70 Chinese students enrolled in the paper. The sample was made up of students who were participants of 6 of the 10 tutorial groups. Each student was approached at the beginning of the semester asking for their participation in the study, at which time it was made clear that all data would be treated in strictest confidence and that no names would be used.

| **Gender** | | **Age** | | **Years Studying in New Zealand** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Male* | *Female* | *Under 21* | *22-23* | *1 year+* | *2 years+* | *3 year+* |
| 12 | 10 | 5 | 17 | 15 | 4 | 3 |

**Table 1.** Composition of the sample

**Data Collection**

Data were obtained from three sources: interviews with the lecturer responsible for delivering the paper; observation of lectures and tutorials; and, interviews with students. To gain an understanding of the Chinese students' experiences, the researcher attended each lecture and selected tutorials. Attending tutorials also provided the opportunity to observe Chinese students working in smaller groups. Issues that surfaced in the tutorials were then followed up in the interviews. Being Chinese and Mandarin speaking enabled the researcher to develop a rapport with the students.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the 6th week of the semester when students had become fully engaged in the paper including completing assessments. The interviews lasted on average 60 minutes and were conducted in Mandarin so that students 'would feel at ease in expressing their ideas in their own language' (Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002, p. 140). Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. The data was subjected to a thematic analysis with the aim of 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

**FINDINGS**

**Observation of lectures and tutorials**

The Chinese students in the study soon discovered that the lectures they attended were very different from those they had experienced in China. They were informal and fast-paced with the lecturer working from PowerPoint slides in a large lecture theatre. Rarely was the textbook referred to in the lecture; students were expected to have read the material prior to the session. 'Class notes' were not used; instead, students downloaded the PowerPoint slides, used the textbook or made their own notes on their laptops in the class.

The lecturer frequently asked students a direct question which for the Chinese students was not only unusual but stressful for they were not used to interacting directly with the lecturer in such a public forum.

The lecturer also had a habit of asking students to take part in exercises in the lecture. In one lecture, eight students, including two Chinese students, were 'invited' to complete a task outside of the theatre. The group left to carry out the task which involved online research and preparation of a short presentation. On their return, the group presented their findings to the class and was applauded by the lecturer and class for their efforts. For Chinese students, this was an unusual lecture.

In the smaller, more personal tutorials, the Chinese students found themselves being addressed by their first name. Although the setting was less intimidating than the large lecture, the Chinese students still found participating in discussions difficult, again hindered by the ever-present language barrier.

**Interviews with the lecturer**

The lecturer is highly experienced with a reputation for innovative teaching founded on experiential learning. His approach to teaching the paper is guided by five principles:

1) That the material should be *relevant* to the student's level and ability;
2) That students should be actively *involved* in the learning experience;
3) That opportunities should exist for *participation*, for example in the tutorials;
4) That students should find the material and the learning processes *challenging;* and,
5) That assessment should be closely *aligned* with the teaching process and content.

The paper's learning objectives were aligned closely with the assessments. For example, a group exercise that involved interviewing a manager, writing a report and making a presentation re-surfaced in the final examination. Tutorial work was also reflected in the final assessment.

**The lectures**

While generally positive about the lectures, the Chinese students voiced familiar concerns:

> My listening skills are not adequate to understand the lecture. Sometimes I am unable to concentrate on the content … as a result I don't know what he said. (Participant 4)

> Mostly I can catch the lecture, although his thinking style is different from Asian style, and so sometimes I cannot understand. But if I can't understand I can watch the video again after class. (Participant 6)

**The tutorials**

Tutorials were a new experience for the Chinese students where participation was also worth 10% of their internal assessment.

> Mostly I can understand the purpose of the tutorial. But, sometimes, when the tutor mentioned some companies with which we are not familiar and some specialized questions, I am confused … I am worried about it. (Participant 22)

Another commented however:

> I am not used to discuss with my group members. I usually listen to their discussion. When they talk to me, they speak slowly and try to let me understand what they discussed. (Participant 15)

Group presentations were often a challenge for Chinese students:

> I am afraid of the presentation and reluctant to present myself, because of not only the lack of confidence in English, but also the lack of skills in practical presentation. (Participant 1)

**The assessments**

The range of internal assessment was new to the Chinese students who were more familiar with a final examination:

> In China, I only had quizzes, mid-examinations, final examinations. My presentation competence was never judged. I studied by myself without participating in groups. I think the assessment is very crucial … (Participant 20)

> I feel the burden of many assignments. I have never experienced a group presentation and group report in China. I am afraid to present myself in class. (Participant 11)

> I feel great pressure from too many quizzes, final examination and too many assignments. Much more learning takes place outside of the classroom. I don't know how to study the paper independently. (Participant 2)

## DISCUSSION

**Communication competency**

Lack of proficiency in both written and spoken English among international students is well documented in the literature (Campbell & Li, 2008; Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002*;* Read & Hayes, 2003; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). For many of the Chinese students in the study it was *the* major barrier to them fully engaging in many aspects of the paper, including for example, tutorial discussions. Not only were they faced with mastering new material and adapting to new approaches to teaching but they were also aware of the need to improve their English. In one short semester, with the pressure of passing the compulsory paper, this was an almost insuperable barrier.

**New forms of assessment**

The Chinese students faced a variety of new and challenging assessments; for example, group-based presentations. Few had experienced group assignment work and few possessed the required skills, such as those necessary for group presentations. The same was true of case analysis. Written assignments invariably asked them to 'reflect' on tutorial experiences or to 'critically evaluate' theoretical material, a form of analysis that was 'the greatest mystery to them' (Holmes 2004, p. 204). In tutorials, they were faced not only with taking part in discussions and activities but they were also being assessed on their participation. Even the traditional examination provided little comfort where again they were asked to apply theoretical frameworks rather than simply being asked to regurgitate information from the text.

**Psycho-social pressures**

Many of the Chinese students found the paper a stressful experience and expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to pass it. They worried about being called upon by the lecturer and feared that they would not have the 'right' answer and be seen as 'stupid' in front of their peers. At all times their poor command of the English language simply compounded their worries. They also

worried about not being able to make a useful contribution to the group work that permeated the paper and were concerned that they would negatively affect their group's performance. Many lived with a 'fear of failure' throughout the semester.

**Adjusting to a new learning environment**

The literature tends to focus on international students and the requirement that they overcome their 'skill deficiencies' in order to adjust to the new academic demands. Less emphasis is obvious about the role of the institutions in the adjustment process. In this study, the lecturer included material which Asian, and particularly Chinese students, could associate with; for example, case studies of New Zealand companies operating in China. Inter-cultural material was also used. Prior to the semester tutors were familiarized with the educational and cultural background of Chinese students although none of them were Asian. In contrast, one tutorial in the paper was ear-marked for indigenous, Māori students who made up a smaller proportion of the class.

Institutional support was available to international students through a teaching and learning unit but unless directed by tutors, Chinese students were often reluctant to admit their short-comings and seek help. To do this meant admitting that they were not able to meet the performance standards of the paper. When they did seek help it was often too late. Academic support was provided for international students at the end of the semester targeted at the up-coming exams but this was not enough to overcome the problem of writing under exam conditions.

In practice, the adjustment process appears largely one-way. Having come to study in New Zealand, it was primarily the student's responsibility to 'adjust' to the new learning environment but to succeed, adjustments were needed at the institutional level; for example, in terms of the material and delivery system used.

## CONCLUSION

For these Chinese students the paper was a major challenge where their poor English was a barrier to them quickly adjusting to the new academic requirements. However, for successful adjustments to occur there also needs to be changes in the curriculum, content and delivery systems. The study suggests a number of ways that might assist Chinese students to make this adjustment. Firstly, employ senior Chinese students fluent in both Mandarin and English who had successfully completed the paper to act as 'mentors'. Having experienced the paper, they would be well placed to provide practical support for their fellow-Chinese. Secondly, provide lecturers who work with Chinese students with specific support; for example, Mandarin speaking tutors or support staff.

The study also suggests areas for future research, such as exploring the experiences of domestic students who interact with international students. For example, with a significant part of the assessment being group-based, what are the experiences of domestic students working with first year international students? In addition, it would be useful to investigate the experiences of academic staff, including tutors, who are involved in teaching international students in large first year papers.

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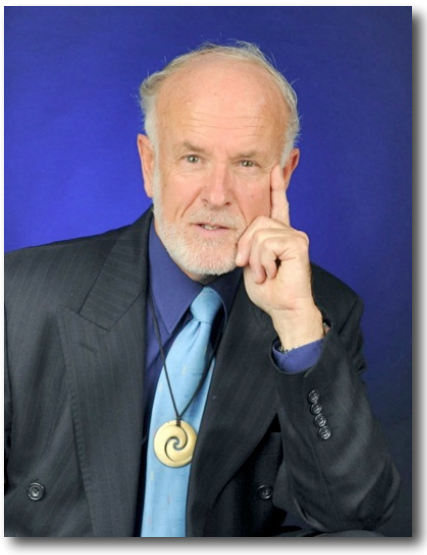

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