

Creating a third cultural space: What role does intercultural communication play in PGR teaching?

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Abstract

As an internationalised space, the University of Warwick has over 9500 international students and more than 40% international academic staff. Thus, intercultural encounters are ubiquitous on campus, including teaching spaces. Among all the international student groups, the Chinese student community emerges as one of the largest at Warwick. This offers a unique teaching experience for those who are involved in teaching this group at Warwick. Therefore, in this reflective piece, we draw on our own cultural experiences as Chinese PGRs teaching Chinese PGTs in a UK-based university, with the aim to reflect on the different cultural values underlying our teaching practices influenced by both Chinese and British education cultures. We also reflect on Chinese students' learning behaviours based on our observations and how those are formed and negotiated by us as Chinese teachers/students in a multicultural communication space at Warwick. We propose the adoption of the concept of third culture teaching, a teaching practice that goes beyond either Chinese education culture or British education culture. In particular, we use two examples to discuss the relevance of intercultural considerations in PGRs' teaching practices, one targeting the perceptions of student-teacher relationships in supervision and the other on the concept of classroom engagement. With this discussion, we make suggestions for the intercultural-related areas for PGRs to ponder upon and prepare for better teaching practices encompassing a wide range of learning needs.

Keywords: Third space, teacher-student engagement, intercultural teaching reflection, Chinese international students

Introduction

The topic of interactions between people from different cultures, or intercultural communication, has been gaining attention in discussions of the UK Higher Education system. Specifically, in the teaching space, this discussion mainly focuses on students' intercultural learning in language education and their intercultural communication in group work. Not much importance has been attached to teacher-student intercultural encounters. As authors, both of us have had the experience of studying in the UK as international students. Moreover, we have been delivering teaching to international Postgraduate Taught students (PGTs) as international Postgraduate Research students (PGRs) on Graduate Teaching Assistant contracts (GTA, and thus we have often been referred to as the GTAs). Therefore, we are conscious of the influence of culture on teacher-student engagement. As intercultural communication has always been one of our reflection topics in the authors' teaching practice, in this reflective piece, we want to present some of our thoughts on teacher-student interaction.

Considering the context of Warwick University, a reflection on the role of culture in our teaching practices is very much needed. The University of Warwick has over 9,500 international students (University of Warwick, 2023) and more than 40% international academic staff (University of Warwick, 2021), making it a teaching space where a great number of intercultural encounters occur. As a result, internationalisation strategy has always been one of the four key pillars of Warwick University's educational strategy (University of Warwick, 2023). By reflecting more on our cultural perspective in teaching practices, we hope to contribute to a more internationalised and inclusive environment for everyone at the university.

In the rest of this reflective writing, we will ponder on student-teacher relationships and classroom engagement. It is worth mentioning that, while our reflection is based on personal examples, in order to make our students unidentifiable for ethical considerations, we decide not to specify which reflection is based on whose experience and have minimised details of the story. Then, we will conclude with some suggestions for PGR teachers teaching in intercultural settings.

We are aware that some of our discussions regarding cultural influences may appear essentialist to some readers. We understand that culture does not have a deterministic influence on people. However, we have to admit that as "a complex set of meaning systems", culture has its influence on people's behaviour and interpretations of the world and its influence is "shared to varying degrees" by its members (Spencer-Oatey & Kadar, 2021, p. 45). Therefore, in our reflections, we use those generalised ideas to discuss cultural tendencies.

Reflection 1: Student-teacher relationship

Let us start our reflection on the student-teacher relationship with a story from one of us¹:

When I was teaching as a GTA, one of my teaching responsibilities was to supervise PGT dissertation writing. During the process of dissertation supervision, a PGT supervisee did not engage with me at all. Later, I was informed that the student applied for an extension due to mental health issues. I was a bit disappointed that the student did not tell me about their struggle. In my later communication with the student, I got to know that they did not even tell their family, because they would not want them to worry.

In the story, we, as supervisors, had the disappointment because we hold the belief that teachers are friends to students and thus, students should feel free to share anything with us. Even though we would never be able to find out what was behind the student's consideration, based on our communication, we think that there are a few possible explanations for the student's non-engagement and non-disclosure:

1. It could be because mental health is considered a stigmatised topic by the student and thus, they did not want to discuss it with their supervisor. They might have concerns that revealing their mental health issue would lead their supervisor to doubt their academic ability and mark them less favourably.
2. It could also be because they saw their supervisor as a parental figure. As they would not like to inform their family, they did not want to share their life challenges with their supervisor.

Either way, the student was likely to see the student-teacher relationship differently from the supervisor. This could be interpreted with reference to the information (even though limited) we received from the students together with the Chinese cultural beliefs. Under the influence of the Confucian tradition, respect for teachers is a core learning virtue in China (Li, 2012). There is much similarity between the teacher-student relationship and parent-child relationship, evidenced by an old Chinese saying that goes, "Once a teacher, always a parent". Teachers and parents are authoritative figures in the student's life and should be treated with respect. Therefore, worrying those authority figures with personal challenges can be considered inappropriate.

However, our experience in the UK education culture and the teaching practice have impacted our expectations. As can be seen from the above example, we were expecting the students to be open to us about mental health struggles. Generally, the pedagogy in the UK is more learner-centred than that in China, and students are encouraged to be challengers (Zhang, 2021). Therefore, it is rather common for students to bring up issues or challenge our current supervision focus to take mental health into consideration. Both the supervisor and the student are Chinese nationals in the UK, and we should have

¹ Please note that this is a rather brief version of the story. The detailed interactions between the supervisor and supervisee cannot be shared for ethical reasons.

access to the Chinese and UK cultural understandings of the role of supervisor and supervisees and the associated rights and obligations. However, there were still some communication challenges between us Chinese nationals in the UK, which shows that we adopted those two cultural perspectives to different degrees.

It should also be noted that the supervisor and the student in the story have different lived academic experiences as PGR students and as PGT students respectively. As a PGR teacher, the supervisor has already had the experience of working closely with a supervisor at Warwick, while the PGT student was new to the supervision experience in this institution. Those experiences are part of the university educational culture that the supervisor carries and inevitably influence their expectations and assumptions about what their students know about supervision practices. However, at that point, it is not clear whether the student carried a similar or different university study culture. The supervisor may have brought into the supervision the assumption that the student would know about supervision practices as much as they do and thus missed the opportunity to provide more timely support and interventions.

To conclude, in this example, we see that from the outside, even though the supervisor and the student share cultural similarities, there are still differences in their understandings of the appropriate ways to manage mental health and supervision. If we imagine the two approaches to the situation under discussion as the two ends of a continuum, then the supervisor and the student were in different places of the continuum. The difference in their perceptions of the student-teacher relationship possibly led to the perceived lack of communication regarding mental health concerns by the supervisor.

Reflection 2: Concept of classroom engagement

The second example we want to share is related to the widespread complaints of the lack of student engagement among Chinese PGTs in lectures and seminars. We have observed from our own teaching experiences and heard from other PGR teachers that Chinese international students are not active in classroom engagement (e.g., responding to questions) and are prone to stay quiet. Therefore, we would like to explore the cultural perspectives behind such a phenomenon. As cultural insiders ourselves, we are aware of our traditional educational system where students are taught to listen quietly to the teachers and only speak up when being called upon so as not to disturb teaching (Li, 2012). At the same time, we are also familiar with the expected frequent classroom engagement in the UK. Therefore, we had conversations with students after the seminars to explore the reasons and possible solutions and whether we needed to adapt our practices.

Interestingly, after speaking to students about such matters, we discovered several reasons behind the silence:

1. Confusion in understanding the task caused by language issues,
2. Lack of confidence in their own oral English and concern of their English being judged by course mates afterwards of their oral English skills

3. Worries of standing out. For example, speaking up may set a student apart from their peers, which will later on make them unfavourable outside the classroom.
4. Silence is the result of the overall silence. Those who are able to understand the task and the question and have the ability to speak up, start to have second thoughts of whether they haven't thought through because no one would answer even a seemingly simple question.

Interestingly, especially in the case of not understanding the task, very few students would take the courage to ask questions to clarify the task, even if we would ask several times whether they understood the task or not. They would still perform the task in confusion and clarify with other coursemates using the time allocated to the task itself.

By reflecting upon the reasons, we realised that different from our expectations as tutors, students display a broader consideration over their learning experiences. To illustrate, the above reasons (particularly 2 and 3) exhibit students' concerns after and outside the teaching space. They influence students' social relationships and group work experiences, and coursemates' support and knowledge exchanges. These learning experiences are often neglected by us as tutors. What we focus on tends to be whether we achieve our learning objectives or not, which is limited to the classroom space. We expect the students to show full comprehension of the knowledge we teach, and classroom engagement is a way to show such understanding. Therefore, from the teaching point of view, there is nothing wrong with the encouragement of classroom engagement. However, from the student's perspective, this seems, to a certain extent, to contradict their interests beyond the classroom. The cause of this phenomenon is also related to the overall structure of GTA teaching in that we are not responsible for the full learning experience of our students but for a confined period. Sometimes we tend to forget that students' learning does not stop after one lecture or seminar. Consequently, silence in one session does not always indicate poor learning. There can be more for us to understand in the broader learning context.

There are also culturally related interpretations for us to reflect on in these perspectives. From reasons 1-2, we can observe the overly quoted issue of language proficiency among Chinese international students. As cultural insiders and cultural researchers, we are aware that language is never about the simple understanding of words and sentences. As teachers, "every time we use language, we perform a cultural act" (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999, p.113). The meaning we convey through language and the logical structure are all culturally laden. Thus, the success of our teacher communication lies in the understanding of culturally situated meanings, and we need to be aware that this is often hard for international students. In addressing the issue of cultural communication, the students can gain valuable experiences. In the meantime, we as teachers need to constantly reflect on our design of the content and the language we use and how we can create a gradual process for our students' learning curve to grow. Reasons 2 and 4 also present students' cultural understanding of learning in that it reflects their understanding of the tolerance of imperfections or mistakes in the classrooms. It can be seen that for Chinese international students, the tolerance is relatively low, whereas in other cultures it might be more acceptable to make mistakes.

Reflection and Conclusion

In both our examples, we have observed different understandings with regard to learning caused by either original cultural background or university-level experience. This is deemed inevitable as there are always two expectations: the UK and the Chinese perspectives on learning and education. The UK perspective is rooted in our immediate environment and the Chinese perspective is what our students and us carry. It is unrealistic to ask students to adapt fully to the UK standards and at the same time insensitive in the spirit of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Moreover, those cultural perspectives can never be static, and it is challenging to know the extent to which our students have adopted certain cultural perspectives.

What is more interesting is that the examples also seem to indicate that the space we are teaching is an unsafe space for students. Students have reservations about their mental health struggles and their responses to the classroom questions. Of course, the issue is not solely on the teachers. As we argue, there are the cultural factors behind each example. Therefore, it relies on us to explore the options of reconciliation, and under this context, we propose the idea of third culture teaching.

The concept of a third space is not new, but it is still growing in great popularity (Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez, 2008). It is often used in areas of immigration and national identity (Wilson, 2000) and recently in English language teaching that intends to take culture into pedagogical consideration (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999). As we argued before, whenever we teach English, either as first-language users or second-language users, we will always engage with culture to a certain extent. For those who use English as their second language, the cultural situation will be even more complicated, as they are engaging two cultures: that of their mother tongue and that of their working language (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999). This engagement of culture applies to both the teachers and the students. In other words, both us and the students are in between cultures. We are neither in 100% UK culture (due to our background), nor in 100% Chinese culture (due to the language we are engaging with). Automatically, we're in a third space.

Because of this, when approaching students, we need to let go of the cultural assumptions we carry and create a third culture space between students and us. From the examples, we can see that we as PGR teachers have had our perspectives based on our background and thus have expectations around students' behaviours in formal teaching. We have the tendency to miss out on the exploration of the variety of possibilities because our cultural background has taught us about right/wrong behaviour. However, forming a constructive mindset for the building of a third culture will make us open to more students' voices and alternative worldviews and challenge our long-held beliefs (Ikpeze, 2015).

In light of the above discussion, we make the following recommendations:

1. Be aware of the student's cultural and our own cultural and educational backgrounds and reflect on how these experiences might have influenced our assumptions and expectations.

2. Question our understanding of educational procedures and practices, rights and obligations of different roles, learning and teaching experiences etc., and whether these are the same as those of our students.
3. Question the way we use language, design teaching content, make references etc. Question if any of the above usages are culturally specific and if our students have the same culturally specific understanding. Be aware that culture is everywhere, sometimes even rooted in our unique personal experiences.
4. Clarify our expectations and engage in open discussions with students in a way that we let down our rooted cultural assumptions and build new third cultures with students.

In conclusion, this reflection work draws attention to a neglected aspect of teaching-student engagement. It uses two authentic examples to demonstrate how culture can complicate the teaching environment. Through the recommendations provided, this work contributes to the development of PGR teachers for inclusive teaching practices.

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