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East-Asian teaching practices through the eyes of Western learners

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Many East-Asian countries are actively positioning themselves as receiving countries of international students. Consequently, the number of international students in these countries is steadily growing. Given the differences between Eastern and Western conceptions of teaching and learning, it could be expected that Western learners studying in the region may encounter educational practices that are foreign to them. This study sought to understand contemporary East-Asian teaching practices as experienced by Western students. Specifically, it explored Anglo and Hispanic students' perceptions of the pedagogic approaches they encountered at a Taiwanese university. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 degree-seeking students in different fields of study. The findings indicate that despite the government's continuous initiatives to foster less traditional pedagogic approaches, a transmission model of instruction still looms large in Taiwan's higher education context. It was also found that the students in this study were ill-adapted to this form of teaching practice.

Keywords: international students; Western learners; Chinese teachers; Confucian heritage culture; East-Asian higher education

Introduction

Global student mobility has escalated more than fourfold in the past three decades. The latest statistic released by the OECD indicates that 3.7 million students were enrolled in higher education abroad in 2009 (OECD 2011), and this figure has been forecasted to continue rising (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2009). With classroom demographics becoming increasingly heterogeneous, university teachers are faced with the challenge of educating learners who may embrace different conceptions of learning than their own. The challenge can be particularly daunting when a teaching context involves students sojourning between the East and the West, as abundant evidence has indicated that educational beliefs and practices in these two parts of the world are distinctly different (Chen and Bennett 2012; Li 2010). For example, it has been argued that while Western education aims to develop thinking abilities such as reasoning, analysis, and inquiry, Asian schooling prioritizes cultivating learning virtues such as diligence, perseverance, and concentration (Li 2010). Differences in educational values indisputably have a direct bearing on how teaching is conducted in the two cultures.

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As the direction of student mobility has traditionally been from East to West, previous research concerning cross-cultural pedagogic practices has been almost exclusively limited to interactions between Asian learners and Western teaching. As a result, there is a substantial body of literature to assist Western academics in understanding Asian learners' perceptions of their teaching and potential barriers to the learners' success in the environment. Migration from West to East, on the other hand, is a relatively new phenomenon, so there is little research in this area to date. Nevertheless, given the recent ambitious initiatives launched by many Asian countries, including China, Singapore, Japan, and Malaysia, to transform themselves from being on the periphery to becoming major players in the international student market (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2009; Li and Zhang 2011), growth in the West-to-East migration may be expected in the years to come (Bhandari, Belyavina, and Gutierrez 2011). In fact, China is making high-profile attempts to attract Western students from prestigious universities in the USA, the UK, and Australia, which it views as one way to demonstrate its 'education power' (Sharma 2012). Currently, research involving Western learners in East Asia has focused on factors affecting students' choices of destination and their general adjustment to the new cultural surrounds, rather than their adaptation to teaching approaches (e.g. Roberts, Chou, and Ching 2010; Tanaka et al. 1994). Thus, little is known about how these learners perceive the East-Asian pedagogic practices they have encountered and what impact these practices may have on their learning.

Traditional East-Asian teaching practices have consistently been depicted as following a transmission model, with the roles of teacher and learner clearly defined. The teacher, as a respectable authority in their field, imparts knowledge to learners through predetermined procedures. Good teaching is epitomized in a carefully prepared lecture that captures the gist of the textbook. The learner, on the other hand, has the responsibility to concentrate in class and review the content after the lesson is over in order to keep pace with the rest of the class (Chen and Bennett 2012). Accordingly, the key learner trait rewarded in this educational system is effort (Watkins and Biggs 2001). In addition to other cultural traditions, such as the strong hierarchy in East-Asian societies, a significant factor accountable for the didactic form of pedagogy is the exam-dictated measurement of success. Li (2010, 41) argued that the emphasis on exams in Confucian heritage cultures (CHCs) would persist due to a Confucian moral emphasis on the 'equality of education for all regardless of personal background'. This principle entails the practice of objective and ostensibly impartial assessment methods, as it ensures that everyone's advancement in education depends solely on their own amount of effort. Under the constant pressure of exams throughout their schooling, learners in these cultures have come to expect that a major responsibility in the teacher's role is to coach students to pass exams (Kember, McNaught, and Ma 2006). To meet this expectation, a teacher-centered approach to instruction has long prevailed in East-Asian education, partly because it allows more content to be covered in a short time, thus giving students an advantage in their exams (Yuen and Hau 2006).

Recently, however, fueled by the inexorable economic globalization, major education reforms have been undertaken in many Asian countries. The goals are to increase learners' international competiveness by equipping them with essential generic skills, such as critical thinking, problem–solving, and independent learning abilities (Law et al. 2010; Marton 2010). Excellent teaching has now been redefined

as interactive and learner-centered. In the higher education context, it is often implemented in the form of project-, problem- or inquiry-based teaching practice (e.g. Lee, Shen, and Tsai 2010; Takahashi and Sait 2011), which is claimed to be able to foster learners' development of the desirable metacognitive skills. In fact, this new model of teaching is in congruence with, if not imported from, Western notions of good pedagogy. Kember, McNaught, and Ma (2006) researched award-winning teachers' accounts of their own practices in Hong Kong. The research generated 17 principles of exemplary teaching, such as selecting content that students perceive as relevant and helping them develop self-managed learning ability. These principles, Kember, McNaught, and Ma (2006, 71) stated, paralleled 'enlightened ideals in the Western university system'. It must be pointed out that the present paper does not intend to assess whether these 'Western' conceptions of teaching are preferable to traditional East-Asian ones. It is also important to note that by making the distinction between Eastern and Western beliefs about teaching and learning, this paper is not suggesting educational cultures in these two parts of the world are internally homogeneous and hermetically sealed from each other. Of primal concern here is how widely the 'new' pedagogical concepts are being implemented in current university teaching in East Asia. If this form of teaching practice has gained significant ground, there may be fewer impediments to Western international students' academic transition from their home to host universities in East Asia.

This study is part of a larger project that explored non-Asian international students' learning experiences at a university in Taiwan. Taiwan's educational system, its recent educational reforms, and aspirations to internationalize higher education parallel those of its East-Asian counterparts (Roberts, Chou, and Ching 2010). The government is seeking to double its international student number to 7.5% of the overall student body by 2014, a percentage similar to those of Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia (Liu 2011). Substantial funding has been injected into scholarship programs and projects for supporting universities to provide English-taught courses or degrees. As a first step to understanding international students' experiences, this study focused on Anglo and Hispanic international students' perceptions of the teaching practices they encountered when studying in Taiwan. Specifically, this study examined their perceptions of *what* and *how* they were taught in the Taiwan context.

Methodology

This study was conducted at one of the major host universities of international students in Taiwan. Participants were 22 degree-seeking international students from Central America, North America, and Europe. The question guiding the research was: 'How do the students perceive Taiwanese teachers' teaching practices in terms of the course content and pedagogic approaches?' The participants were recruited through an advertisement sent to all international students enrolled in academic courses (not those enrolled in Mandarin language programs because the interest of this study was in students' experiences in their fields of academic study). Both degree-seeking and exchange students were recruited, but data collected from the latter group was later removed because the findings indicated that exchange students generally did not have a compatible level of commitment to their academic study as their degree-seeking counterparts. The participants comprised 9 undergraduate and

13 Master's students, and the percentage of males (55%) and females (45%) was closely balanced. Their areas of study were commerce ($N = 11$), social sciences ($N = 7$), liberal arts ($N = 2$), and communication ($N = 2$). Eleven of them were first-year students in their program, five were second-year students, another five were in their third year, and one in the fourth year. The students were from 11 countries: the USA ($N = 5$), Guatemala ($N = 5$), Nicaragua ($N = 3$), Germany ($N = 2$), and one each from England, the Netherlands, Russia, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru, and Colombia. More than 80% of them had studied at a university back home before coming to Taiwan, which gave them a point of reference when commenting on pedagogic practices in Taiwan. Finally, although one-third of the students said that they were confident in their Chinese language ability, the majority (86%) were enrolled in English-taught courses.

Each participant was interviewed for about an hour. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in English. The participants were asked to describe how their teachers conducted classes. They were also asked what they perceived they should learn in class. In addition, they were invited to discuss their perceived benefits from the teaching practices, and the challenges they faced with these practices. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis, using qualitative analysis software NVivo 9 (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2010).

Results and discussion

This section responds to the research question by presenting and discussing the findings in two parts: students' perceptions of the course content and of their teachers' pedagogic approaches. It should be emphasized at the outset that the findings reported here represent the teaching practices as the students experienced them, rather than Taiwanese teaching practices per se. References following quotes give the interviewee number (with the letters 'u' and 'm' referring to an undergraduate and a Master's participant, respectively), the participant's area of study, and their country of origin.

What they were taught: student perceptions of the course content

One persistent theme running through the data was the focus of the teaching on the course text, whether it was the textbook or reading materials assigned by the teacher. Many undergraduate students found the amount of content that was covered overwhelming. For example, one said that the courses 'take a lot of content very fast . . . you just go, knowing something about something, but not deep into the content' (u3, Commerce, Guatemala). Master's students, on the other hand, were split in their opinions of this issue. They said that the amount of content varied from course to course. Nevertheless, they shared the observation that the knowledge taught tended to be factual, as illustrated in this German student's comment:

> It is extreme amounts of facts which is nothing that German teachers would do. I think what we are being taught in Germany is to access information in a certain way. They are teaching us how to find the key for certain information, how to interpret certain information, and here it is a lot about factual knowledge in a lot of cases. (m13, Social Sciences)

Unanimously, the students expressed the concern that they were not taught how to apply textbook knowledge to real-life situations in their courses. A Commerce participant stated:

> The lecture is about the chapter that we read. It doesn't give more added value, you know, like cases where the chapter was applied, companies for example that applied the things that we are discussing and how they were successful or not. Those were the things that I was expecting but basically, it's a lecture. (m2, Guatemala)

Others also spoke of the teachers relying heavily on examples in the textbook to illustrate the theoretical knowledge being taught. An American student gave the example of her calculus teacher, noting that the teacher would use 'really crazy examples for you to work out, [such as] if you're going to design a bridge' (u7, Commerce). For this business student, the example was 'unrealistic' and not a 'real-life application', so she did not find it particularly effective for her learning.

Also related to the emphasis on the course text is the repeated comment that few teachers drew on their experiences beyond the classroom in their teaching, something the students wished could happen in more of their courses. In fact, when asked what their favorite course was, all participants highlighted those in which the teacher discussed their own professional practices. In business courses, this referred to the teacher's work experience in industries. In courses that required students to conduct research, this meant the teacher's own research experience in the field. For example,

> [The teacher is] a CEO from a company who is experienced and knows what he's talking about. So when you ask something, you know you're going to get the right answer, not the book answer. You're going to get – the field answer [real-life answer], the experience. (u6, Commerce, El Salvador)

> She is living for the topic that she is teaching . . . Her topic of research is her topic of teaching and you can really feel the personal involvement in the whole thing and she is teaching something that I cannot access on my own which I think is an extremely valuable thing. (m13, Social Sciences, Germany)

Admittedly, not every teacher came with an abundance of work or research experience that they could utilize. However, the following quote suggests that it was not the experience per se, but the knowledge that the teacher, as a more experienced practitioner in the field, had developed from their life beyond the immediate teaching context that the students deemed to be most valuable:

> It's more like they know what they're talking about because they've been through it . . .. When they talk, they have this conviction, they know it – not because it's in a book written by someone random, it's because they know it, they've seen it. (u5, Commerce, Nicaragua)

However, in the students' experience at the university, this kind of teacher was in the minority. As one student put it, most teachers 'don't [share] any experience they had or [things] they see . . . to support the reading or the material in the book. They do everything literally and textually' (u3, Commerce, Guatemala).

Put together, the findings concerning the course content suggest that, from the students' perspective, the connection between what they were learning and their real-life contexts was relatively weak. This weak connection was manifested in three aspects:

the focus of the teaching on the breadth of content knowledge; a reliance on drawing examples from the textbook rather than from real life to illustrate the content being taught; and a lack of the teacher bringing their personal knowledge (i.e., knowledge developed in everyday life that is related to the course content) to the teaching. While such a teaching approach may be, as previously stated, a product of the exam-dominated educational system, it is surprising to identify its prevalence in this study, given that in Taiwan the pressure of external exams (unlike at high school) is lifted off learners and hence their teachers at university. One reason that can account for this form of practice is that it may accord with the teachers' own conception of learning.

According to Paine (1990), the learning process in CHCs involves four key stages. The first three require the learner to gain knowledge from the text, understand the knowledge, and solidify that knowledge. Only when all this has been achieved can one apply the knowledge. Moreover, as understanding and solidifying knowledge have to be achieved through accruing a substantial amount of content and reviewing it diligently, and the teacher is believed to be an expert in the content, teachers are expected to teach as much content as they can in a systematic and efficient manner. As for knowledge application, despite the abundant body of literature on CHC learners, there are few discussions in this literature about how they are taught to apply what they learn at school or university. In fact, as Hu (2002) pointed out, the potential application of knowledge gained by CHC learners in educational contexts is rarely made transparent to them; what is considered more important by CHC teachers is to help the learners build a strong foundation on which their future application of this knowledge is possible. In other words, it is believed that real-life application takes place *after* one leaves formal education. Accordingly, knowledge beyond the educational context, including examples from real life, and the teacher's or learners' personal experiences, is not regarded as significant forms of knowledge at universities.

In short, the Western students in this study felt that the Taiwan context considered the authoritative text and the teacher's analysis and interpretation of the text to be major forms of valid knowledge. They experienced frustration with this form of curriculum that is highly insulated from practice in real life. In contrast, they believed it to be paramount that what they were taught had immediate relevance to their lives. They also viewed textbook content as knowledge that they could access on their own and therefore had less value. Hence, in terms of course content, the Taiwan teaching practices did not meet the students' expectations.

How they were taught: student perceptions of the teaching approaches

All the students were of the opinion that their teachers had expert disciplinary knowledge and were ready to help them solve problems when approached after class. Nevertheless, the interviews indicate that the students found the teaching methods they experienced to be lecture-oriented and not sufficiently engaging. The following quote aptly summarizes this view. In the quote, a student was comparing two Taiwanese teachers' lecturing styles, with the opinion of the first teacher being more representative of most students' experiences:

> He'll use a PowerPoint and then just kind of read off the PowerPoint and talk a little bit about that. That teaching style for me, and I think for a lot of other international students, is really difficult to get something out of. Although it's very clear, he has all the

> points written down like that, it's kind of monotonous and it's hard not to fall asleep. My [other] teacher is really great. He'll move around . . . And there is a lot of interaction. It's a lecture style but he is still interacting with the class. (u7, Commerce, the USA)

The lack of interaction was also highlighted in the students' discussions of how their teachers dealt with the reading materials that they assigned students to read before class. Some said they would expect the teachers to conduct interactive activities based on students' understanding of the readings, but they found that the teachers often just summarized the readings in a lecture. According to the students, this approach differed greatly from their prior experience in their countries: '[back home] when the teachers said "read this" is because . . . you were going to apply what you read into something else. She wasn't going to tell you the concepts of what you read again' (m4, Commerce, Nicaragua).

Several students said they noticed their teachers' intent to interact with the class, especially the younger teachers or teachers who had experience overseas, but the intent was often not successfully executed. These teachers were described as adopting two techniques to encourage interaction. The first involved asking if students had questions and posing questions to them, which the participants noted often induced few responses. One student recounted why she was unable to interact with the teacher in this kind of situation:

> There is no discussion. Pretty much like when they lecture, they lecture, and then at the end of the time would be like 'Any questions?' Well, we just learn this; there is nothing to focus on or any questions to ask. (m7, Social Sciences, the USA)

This was not an isolated comment. Others expressed the similar concern that the amount of information received during a lecture was normally too large for them to process before the teacher posed a question. The other common technique was to reward students who contributed thoughts by awarding them bonus marks. Several undergraduate students reported that in some courses, a teaching assistant would keep a record of their participation. Disapproval of this method was ubiquitous among the participants. One asked, 'What happens if you . . . understand everything that the teacher's saying, and you have no comments?' (u3, Commerce, Guatemala); another observed that this method resulted in the students making meaningless comments or asking uninspiring questions, consequently wasting everyone's time (m3, Commerce, Nicaragua); still another said she refused to win marks this way because

> the whole point of expressing your mind and sharing your ideas is to have the initiative to learn something from someone else, or to know if what you're saying is right or wrong; but nobody has initiative – they just do it because they get something afterwards, and at the end, it's just grades, and to me, that's just pointless. (u5, Commerce, Nicaragua)

Clearly, the form of interaction the students felt was missing in the teaching was not a one-way information exchange between the teacher and students, but a more interactive and negotiated discussion. One Master's student recalled experiencing the latter type of interaction in one of her courses:

> Everyone gathered in their own groups and they discussed. And then after we had discussed the cases in each group then we had to discuss them all together in a big class.

> So it was quite a nice experience because we all got the chance to express our thoughts and discuss and debate so that we had the opportunity to be more able to say what we thought and everyone participated more. (m1, Commerce, Guatemala)

Most students, however, did not report this level of interaction in their courses, and it appeared to be particularly disappointing for the Master's students. For example, a fourth year Master's student said he could not recall having a good discussion in his classes (m10, Liberal Arts, the USA) and another first-year student also stated, 'I've never been in a class [here in Taiwan] where a comment has really started a fascinating dialogue' (m9, Social Sciences, the USA).

Overall, these results point to a highly structured pedagogic approach characterized by strong teacher control, manifested through a lecture-dominated teaching style, and closely circumscribed class interaction. As previously discussed, CHC teachers see providing a large amount of content for students as their main responsibility. This may have, in part, contributed to the teachers' mostly expository methods as in a practical sense they may have felt lecturing through slides in a predetermined order ensured that all the prepared content was taught. Their inclination to lecture in this manner may also have been made stronger by the fact that most of them were teaching in a foreign language. Hsieh (2012) found that being able to present the course material clearly in English was a major concern for Chinese lecturers in the UK because according to the lecturers, British students tended to attribute their own inability to understand the content to non-native English-speaking lecturers' English. The teachers in the present study may have shared the same concern, which caused them to focus on the clarity of their presentations in order to avoid such criticism from students. A third explanation is that this lecturing approach is reminiscent of the 'virtuoso' teaching model described by Paine (1990), which portrays the relationship between the teacher and students in CHCs as one between a performer and the audience. In this model, a crucial role of a good teacher is to command the stage by virtue of his/her skillful performance. This does not mean that the teacher is indifferent to student's needs, as they are expected to adjust the pace and content of their teaching according to the progress of a particular student group. Nevertheless, this expository approach remains to be one that highlights the teacher demonstrating his/her ability to illuminate the content and learners being part of a group rather than being individuals.

With regard to the strong teacher control in class interaction, the findings show that interaction in the Taiwan teaching context was orchestrated in the sense that the class time allocated to teacher and student talking was clearly demarcated and that the students' opportunities to speak were carefully planned. For example, only when the teacher finished his/her presentation were students invited to talk. Interruptions of lectures by students appeared to be uncommon, suggesting that spontaneous interaction initiated by students during lectures was not encouraged, which indicates a lower tolerance of disorder and the unpredictable in the teaching practice. In addition, rewarding student participation in class interaction with bonus marks, regardless of what students actually contributed to the discussion, shows that the effort students made to participate was considered to be more important than them trying to enhance their understanding and co-construct knowledge through sharing thoughts. This raises the question of whether the teachers who adopted this method with a view to increasing class interactivity believed in the pedagogic benefits of an

interactive environment. As Kim (2002) found in her research, the Western notion of verbalizing one's thoughts to facilitate one's thinking is not shared by East Asians, who consider silence and introspection as essential for thinking. The teachers in this study may have held this same East-Asian belief but still created opportunities for students to interact (despite doing so ineffectively in the students' view) because they were aware of the emphasis on interaction in modern education.

The students in this study could not identify with these teaching methods. They expected the teachers to involve them in a different way in class. Their accounts indicate that in their formative education, primacy was given to the teacher challenging students to think independently and critically about the content being taught through a variety of teaching methods, rather than placing an emphasis on the amount of content and detailed elaboration on this content. Shaped by their educational experiences back home, the students were used to being able to spontaneously question what they were being taught. They were also accustomed to the teacher challenging them to express their thoughts and to debate with one another. However, while all of them expressed a strong motivation to interact with the teacher and their fellow students in class, the results show that most of them did not take the initiative to do so. This appeared to be partly due to their inability to digest the overwhelming amount of content as a precursor to being able to discuss it, and partly due to their caution over behaving inappropriately in a new culture. In sum, the students felt they benefited little from the pedagogic approach they had experienced at the university.

Conclusion and implications

The literature concerning East-Asian teaching practices has typically drawn on experiences and perspectives from the teaching staff and East-Asian learners. The research reported in this paper was the first step to providing educators in the region some insights into how their practices may be perceived by Westerner learners, who may not share the same conceptions of learning as they do. This study investigated these learners' views in two dimensions: the course content and the teaching methods. It found that the students experienced a form of teaching practice that was characterized by a relatively highly insulated curriculum and strongly controlled pedagogy. To summarize, the course content focused on content knowledge and the teacher's interpretations of this knowledge, both strongly confined to the educational context. The course content was then taught to learners through carefully planned and often inflexible procedures, which prioritized teacher lecturing and organized class interaction.

This study also found that the students could not see the teaching practices as conducive to their learning. They felt unable to obtain the type of knowledge they deemed to be particularly valuable. They also considered the teaching methods to be disengaging and demotivating. This feeling of discontent may have arisen from the students' unfamiliarity with East-Asian conceptions of learning, which prevented them from seeing the pedagogic intention behind their perceived monotonous and uninspiring educational experiences. Nevertheless, the students' reactions could be expected, as the characteristics of the teaching practices identified in this study are antithetical to those viewed as desirable in Western education, which include emphases on knowledge being socially and collaboratively constructed (Vygotsky

1978), learning being situated in real-life contexts (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989) and the teacher facilitating learning rather than imparting knowledge on learners. The students' accounts confirmed their experience of this type of teaching in their formative education, which also contributed to their generally disapproving opinions of the Taiwanese teaching.

The students' descriptions of Taiwanese pedagogic practices, in fact, resemble those of traditional East-Asian teaching as documented in the literature. This finding warrants special attention given that traditional and teacher-centered pedagogies are now indisputably seen as undesirable in modern East Asia and scholars are sanguine about a transformation of East-Asian university teaching as a result of the burgeoning number of foreign-educated academics (Kember, McNaught, and Ma 2006; Tam, Heng, and Jiang 2009). Indeed, students in this study observed their teachers' intention to shun authoritarian teaching by welcoming students to speak in class. Therefore, it could be said that changes were happening, albeit slowly. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the slow pace of change was because the teachers embraced new teaching methods but did not have the means to effectively implement them (as seen in their ways of conducting interaction) or because traditional Asian views of learning were still solidly rooted in the teachers' belief system. Future research exploring East-Asian university teachers' epistemic beliefs will be an especially valuable contribution.

As in many countries, university teachers in Taiwan typically do not receive formal teacher training. This did not seem to be a major problem prior to the arrival of international students on university campuses since teachers and students held similar beliefs and expectations about education. With the growing presence of international students, particularly those from the West, it is imperative that East-Asian universities re-examine their programs that involve these students and support teachers who are teaching them. Presently, in Taiwan, the support for teachers includes seminars and workshops that intend to improve their English language skills and teaching methods. While these are useful measures, this study argues that additional, longer-term action should be taken to help teachers examine their existing conceptions of learning and teaching, as previous research has demonstrated a correlation between the academics' conceptions of teaching and their approaches to teaching (Trigwell and Prosser 1996). It should be noted that this study does not suggest that converting to a Western approach to teaching is the solution to improving international students' educational experiences in East Asia since the increasing heterogeneity of student demographics means that adopting such an approach risks hampering non-Western students' learning. Rather, this study argues that by understanding their own and their students' educational beliefs, teachers will be more aware of the potential differences in student experience of their teaching, and hence more able to make informed pedagogic decisions appropriate to most of their learners. This will, in turn, not only benefit international students but local students as well.

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