

COMMUNICATIVE AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE TEACHING OF SECOND LANGUAGES

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Perhaps, in defining the scope of the following article, its observations and comments, the writer should review what this article does not intend to do. The observations do not seek to outline, nor to establish, a general framework for a complete, all-encompassing theory relating to cross-cultural education and teaching, or whether that education and teaching relates to second languages or not. The article is not meant to be an empirical study on the effectiveness of any teaching method, nor does it purport or imply to do any more than the humble title suggests – provide general comments and observations on the multicultural, often “international”, nature of teaching second languages which, in turn, directly relates to interpersonal communication.

The presentation is merely a compilation of comments and observations and made by the writer after years of teaching, business activities, and other general activities which relate to the ways in which various groups, cultures, etc., relate and interrelate to a variety of situations and conditions. Those discussed more specifically will be viewed through the eyes and consciousness of the author.

Furthermore, the writer is the first to caution his readers that he does not, in any way, claim or imply possession of “all the answers”, or even “some” of them! His observations, admittedly, are subjective, colored by the writer’s own experience and outlook, and, as much as the writer has tried to recognize and eliminate his own biases and stereotypes, he recognizes that in the imperfect world in which all of us inhabit, eliminating all aspects of stereotypes, for example, is an impossible task; even recognizing them in ourselves is often exceedingly difficult.

Later in the article, several groups of students will be compared – at least superficially. The groups, by themselves, may have little in common, and the writer is the first to admit that any comparisons are not, purely, “apples-to-apples”. These groups are used merely to demonstrate and provide contrasts for whatever the purpose and ultimate goals that group, or group of groups, sought to achieve. Each group should be

approached on its individual basis, based on its individual yet collective needs. Admittedly, a few of the groups are within the writer's own "cultural setting" and experience. However, the author hopes to suggest that the success a teacher will have depends to a large extent on the preparation and attitude that teacher brings with him into the classroom, before the first class even begins. This does not change from cultural setting to cultural setting.

Of course, the character, personality, etc., of the teacher himself plays a critical role in the process as well. No teacher can separate or isolate himself from this, but he can and should recognize these traits, good and/or bad, in himself and use or correct them to be more effective and, especially, a better communicator, verbally or non-verbally.

Again, the following are observations, simply put, though the writer admits that they easily can be subtle suggestions of points a particular teacher may want to consider, which not only could make the teacher and his teaching process more effective, but could make teaching and interaction with students, even students of other cultures, not only more educational, but much more enjoyable too – for both "sides"! As indicated above, the writer in no way wants to suggest any expertise in this area; he would be interested and grateful to hear details of others' experiences along these lines, both inside and outside the classroom, or suggestions for additional criteria to be employed. Perhaps, by sharing our ideas, views and experiences, the teaching community will be a step closer to a "grand synthesis" in this area of endeavor. The author, therefore, hopes the article will stimulate more thought, examination, and meaningful discussion.

The Writer's Background

The writer's background and experience straddles two broad professional fields, business and higher education. His business background consists mainly of a large company background in the fields of marketing, management and territorial management, sales [the ultimate test and use of communication and teaching!], advertising, and corporate "trouble-shooting" and problem-solving, usually of an interpersonal nature, often relating to interpersonal or inter-organizational problems. The author has (and continues to be) also engaged in extensive business consulting activities as well, both within his culture (America) as well as outside it (China).

A adjunct of these responsibilities involved extensive activity in employee training, teaching and development in all the above-mentioned fields. The writer will agree that "culture" at the corporate level does indeed exist and is probably growing, but for the purposes of this article, will try to exclude references and consideration of it. At some point in the near future, an interesting article or dissertation hopefully might appear, comparing and contrasting the two "cultures" and belief systems.

The author's "other" career lies in higher formalized education, usually as a teacher on the college and university level. While the writer's own "specialty" is history (particularly Central and Eastern European History), interest and events gradually

brought the writer into the realm language study and linguistics, teaching English as a second language and, later, various facets of business English.

The author's emphasis in teaching various topics of English as a second language usually focused upon teaching advanced students and students already having reached at least an "intermediate" level of English, at least to some degree. In that context, he quickly realized that such courses as the traditional "conversation", "writing", "listening", really bore no relationship at all to any "real world" students already saw, and as such, were simply more "buzz words". In order to make progress, significant "alterations" needed to be made!

As such, conversation classes were quickly structured to be classes in speech, public speaking, presentations, interviews, arguing one's point of view (or "product"), etc. Simple conversation practice, per say, simply had lost its meaning and the interest of almost every student. Interestingly enough, this phenomenon seemed to be visible across cultures.

Likewise, "writing" or "advanced writing" needed to be focused on the practical in order to meet with acceptable results and progress. Foremost within this sphere, students' skills of description, explanation, and argument needed to be established and encouraged, and as a basis of that, assignments and discussions needed to center on the nature and practice of "clear thinking", particularly abstract thinking, and problem solving. Assignments, etc., could be aimed in many various directions and subjects, but the teacher tried to incorporate them, at least in general, along the general lines of the class' professional interests and goals, though not exclusively so. Results and progress proved to be better and faster, and students' interest and participation (hence learning) piqued and progressed rapidly.

The traditional "listening" likewise meant little, since students often did not have much real, practical listening experience, or had listened to audio tapes so often that they had the content virtually memorized. In some situations, the school involved only possessed a limited amount of listening material and under heavy budgetary constraints, those situations were unlikely to change or improve in the foreseeable future. The traditional approach was almost immediately jettisoned for a much more practical and "active" approach to the problems and experience of "listening". A few minutes of formal or subtle phonetics practice was covered in each class, and activities, assignments and effectiveness were targeted toward the goal of enunciating property. The teacher has noticed that often the problem with many students is that: (a) they do not speak clearly, (b) they do not speak loudly, to any degree. Granted, 50% of this (as well as "problems" in "Conversation" and "Writing") was probably simply the result of nervousness, especially with a native-speaking teacher, but as the teacher was able to create a relaxed (though not chaotic!) learning environment in the classroom, noticeable improvement quickly became apparent and, as students relaxed and gained self-confidence, progress accelerated even more.

Although the writer does not wish to descend to a battlefield of definitions and petty points to be parsed and quibbled about throughout the article, or as a result of it, one of the few definitions he wishes to suggest as a general working guideline is a de-

definition of *communication* – “the imparting of knowledge/information to another.”¹ Communication, in other words, is the ability to communicate and “receive”, or understand, communications, and is the foundation not only of teaching, business, etc., but virtually of all of human endeavor and interaction.

“Group” (Class) Introductions

As indicated above, the groups to be very broadly commented on are not necessarily “apples to apples”, but comparisons to a limited degree will still be interesting, particularly if the reader remembers a few details about each class grouping.

The first group, “**ASH**”, represents several of the writer’s early groups of history students in America, all undergraduates, most in their first and second years. Perhaps most interesting about this group of student relates to a problem teachers at Universities in America encountered at that time with first and second year students particularly, that is the poor overall quality English, particularly written, grammar, and thinking skills, after having been graduated from secondary school and having entered the university environment. Although many positive changes have been made in succeeding years (though not totally eliminating the problem!), the issue at that time was quickly reaching an educational crisis. The History Departments with which I was associated at that time as a graduate assistant and teaching associate (University of Missouri, University of Kansas) rightly insisted on maintaining the highest quality standard possible, but on a practical level, that meant anyone teaching these groups still faced the problem. Many (at both universities) decided that before the commencement and introduction of any historical learning or thinking, a week or two was needed to teach first and second year students correct English! While this strategy was not too popular with students, progress was made and improvements could be seen in their subsequent classes and careers.²

The second group, “**ABS**”, represents various classes the author taught within the business environment, usually within companies. These students were full-time company employees, very highly motivated, but were also parents, etc, so courses here had to be structured differently, often with little actual homework and within the structure of much greater time restraints on both teacher and student. Often, flexibility has to be realized due to a particularly large workload that week, etc. However, the classes were on company time and covered such business topics as communication (general and specific themes), risk and time management, essentials of underwriting, basics of management and territorial management, customer/client relations, professional writing, etc. Usually the subject matter related to issues the student was encountering daily, even hourly, in his professional position.

¹ Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. New York: Portland House, 1989, p. 298.

² At all American Universities today, entering students are required to pass a year course in English in their first year. Furthermore, at many universities, a student can be required to repeat that year at any time when a professor deems that the student is deficient in English skills (grammar, writing, style, etc.).

Perhaps the “AI” group was the most varied and cross cultural of all groups the author has ever taught. These were mainly new immigrants to America, with very different individual skills and degree of incorporation or association with their new culture, or with each other’s. All knew “basic” English (at least to a certain extent), but still had problems not only with language, but dealing with the English-speaking environment in which they now found themselves, as well as in encountering and learning a “foreign” culture and its impact and influence. With few exceptions, these students tended to be somewhat older, often already employed, matured by the process and experience of emigration and immigration; part of the incentive for the class was learning enough to be able to apply for eventual citizenship. A fast pace in the learning process was also important to them, which seemed to increase frustration levels when errors were made. Students in these classes ranged from Southeast Asians, to Latin Americans, to Africans, to Eastern Europeans and Russians, and increasingly to refugees from the Middle East and Central Asia, etc. Perhaps in this class represented the “purest” direct encounters with cultural differences and traditions, but as the class progressed, students were also anxious to learn from and about each other, which made the class exceedingly rich as a learning experience.

“PSL” students were Polish students at the Foreign Language Teacher’s College in Leszno. Likewise, these classes represent an interesting group in that the various groups of undergraduates, in each undergraduate year, were already accomplished students of English in the process of being educated and trained to be teachers of English themselves. As a result, all of them knew English (and other languages) very well before the first class even started. The goal, therefore, was to polish and perfect their skills; almost all of these students were “native speaker” quality speakers of English from the beginning.

“CSX” students represent the teacher’s various classes of students, mainly at Xi’an University of Science and Technology, in Xi’an, Shaanxi, China. The bulk of the classes were graduate students, most Master’s Students (8 classes), though two classes were Doctoral Students as well. Also included were 4 classes of seniors, finishing their studies and majoring in English and (mainly) American literature. Quality here was very mixed, although the students’ background were better than they thought themselves. Although there has been much criticism in China about the quality of language teaching in secondary schools, the level seemed to be higher than the Chinese realized. (e.g. The writer never heard even one of these students ever make an error with “the” or “a”). Overall, the quality of these students was quite high, many being on full-scholarship, and most already teaching classes in their own technical fields at the University or “loaned” to other universities in the area for that purpose. As a result, one of the additional challenges here, especially in the teaching and classes for doctoral students, was to be fairly flexible because often class times had to be changed slightly to accommodate the majority of schedules. In some instances (doctoral students), some-time classes were “taught” via email, since some of the students had to remain at the site of their research (e.g. Chinese oil fields, coal mines, etc.).³

³ Another separate problem was the question of class size. With few exceptions, all classes numbered between 45–70 students, plus the few who simply “sat in”. With the addition of other classes (with the teacher’s consent), the writer found himself facing a minimum classroom teaching load of 47–48 hours per week!

As the semester began, the teacher was asked by university officials whether I could offer a class for officials, deans, directors, etc., mainly in conversation. This experience also proved to be very enlightening and educational as many of the attendees had traveled and spent time in other countries and, as such, could make many observations on the subject of culture, societies, language, etc.

Lastly, “PSG” indicates students at Gdańsk Technical University in Gdańsk, Poland. As in China, these students were all students of various technical faculties and, despite the general “advanced” and “intermediate” levels, there was a fair degree of differentiation within each class, although, generally, the students had a fairly good knowledge, though were terribly lacking in their confidence to use a second language and, overall, in their general abilities themselves, which crossed departmental lines. In general, these students were “intense”, though not necessarily the hardest working of all prior students I’ve had, but greatly handicapped by learning via the traditional European emphasis on memorization, and long and pointless assignments of “busy work,” and needlessly super long class schedules daily. While the Foreign Language Institute there is quite dynamic (with excellent, very talented, qualified and caring teachers!), the department was also limited in effectiveness by often short-sighted policies by other departments, faculties, and the University administration in general.

General Components of “Educational” Communication

The fundamental building blocks of effective communication in general, as well as educational communication (i.e. “teaching”), rest on dual foundations, the desire to communicate, and the ability to communicate. Simply put, little can be achieved or communicated without desiring or wanting to communicate. However, the desire to communicate, by itself, is useless without the ability to communicate, and such communication is always a two-way street, i.e. interaction between the “communicator” and the “communicatee”.

As with many if not most qualities relating to the human experience, communication is imperfect, perhaps even haphazard. Although some mention of non-verbal communication will be made and alluded to in the course of the article, the focus here is mainly upon verbal communication relating to a second language, but without specific focus on the individual second language itself. Since the author taught English as a second language, his examples and thoughts necessarily follow from those experiences.

Perhaps the most essential point to consider before any preparation is made is that the teacher, like a good sales, marketing, or advertising person (which is really what the teacher is in the classroom), must know, as much as possible, the “audience” he will have. This point sounds unbelievably simple, yet it is rarely considered, extremely important and exceedingly difficult, particularly when teaching and/or preparing to teach students of another cultural background and heritage. One critical aspect, of which more will be said later, demands that the teacher learn as much as possible about that culture, country, social group, etc., even before either’s arrival in the class-

room and interaction begins. Often, when the teacher is attempting this preparation, he himself is new or newly-arrived into that culture and going through the initial or intermediate symptoms of “cultural shock” himself. This is no time for the “faint-at-heart”!

Closely related with the commandment of knowing one’s “audience“, comes that of understanding one’s audience. While this platitude may seem self-evident, it is also one of the most problematic, though not often recognized as such. In the process of meeting and discussing these theories and views with colleagues throughout the world, one of the most amazing facts apparent is that so few teachers of a second language actually, actually have learned a second language of their own, and/or have had so little background, knowledge or exposure to another culture, etc., even though they may have the prerequisite teaching “certificates”. This writer has also noticed, with rare exception anywhere, a certain degree of frustration from students as a result. The transparency and distorted inference suggested by the various “professional” “certifications”, etc., should also be considered at some point in this exegesis, but for sake of brevity, the writer will jettison the notion for another time. Still, they are a major problematical obstacle in the equation.

The issue here, relating again to the teacher’s “knowledge” of a second language, is not the actual fact that he “knows” a second language (although that is extremely valuable!), but that the teacher understands the process and pitfalls of learning it – the difficulty, confusion, contradictions, frustration, etc., inherent in any learning, but particularly frustrating in the learning of languages! To “learn” about them in a teaching class is laudable, but only those who have truly understood and felt these problems themselves, “in their souls”, can truly appreciate them and, with that in mind, structure classes, exercises, etc., which ameliorate these fears and create a much more relaxed and conducive attitude toward learning – and ultimately accomplish the goals of both students and teachers in a much more non-stressed and relaxed manner.

The first of these obstacles, present especially in the beginning of the particular semester is often “learning intimidation”. This, simply put, is the belief by virtually every student that, for example, his vocabulary is poor, conversational skills are non-existent, or that whatever the subject to be covered, that student’s background is “lower than non-existent”. A certain percentage even entertain thoughts to transferring to another, lower-level class. (In the latter situation, this is a tough call for the teacher to make, especially to determine if the student may be correct, after only a minute-long discussion!).

Usually in these situations the writer has found that the student has a better vocabulary than he thinks (although it could still actually leave much to be desired), have better conversational skills than he realizes (after all, the student is talking to you about the problem!), etc. At this point (usually the first or second class), the teacher’s most important goal is establishing an atmosphere in the classroom; the writer here means the need to establish, as quickly as possible, an atmosphere of confidence (i.e. fostering self-confidence in the students), encouragement, and self-respect, and, on that basis, the desire in the student to want to proceed and learn more as well as becoming a more active participant in the learning process. When teaching English as a second language, for example, in the first minutes of the first class, this teacher repeatedly tell his stu-

dents that “I don’t care if you make mistakes... making mistakes is the only way to learn another language... I still make many mistakes in my own language” etc. The primary goal in the first classes and assignments is mainly designed to overcome this “fear”, while at the same time trying to instill and encourage self-confidence, trust, and self-respect, and to draw them into conversations or speaking situations (or writing situations), so quickly that they really don’t have time to remember (and therefore reinforce) their belief that their conversational skills are poor.

If errors are made, this teacher tries not to focus on them individually (“over-focus”), unless they are major mistakes, or unless they are errors that all students are making frequently. He has found that a free-flowing discussion with participation, in a relaxed way, hopefully on some “fun” topics or subjects which students are deeply interested in is a much more valuable and confidence-instilling occurrence than destroying the atmosphere by focusing on negative points, such as errors, at that time.

As such, while the teacher must be aware of his vocabulary (often students will be hearing new words or new ways to express a thought), he must not shy away from this. Yet, he should always be certain that students understand the word and/or the construction or grammatical point used/made. However, at the same time, the teacher must be conscious of avoiding as much “slang” as possible, and while a few idioms in a class are okay, he should be careful not to speak mainly in slang and idioms. This phenomenon only confuses students more, is counterproductive, and detracts from students’ hearing and encountering the English they should be learning and hearing.

Although very difficult, the teacher should physically slow down the pace of his native language speaking and speak more slowly (at least in opening weeks) and clearly, to provide more of an opportunity for his students to hear and understand what he is saying which, in turn, will then only heighten students’ self-confidence in understanding the spoken language from a “native” or otherwise expert speaker. Coupled with this is the need to speak loudly, much more loudly than usual, and to enunciate clearly and distinctly! The immediate, corresponding challenge is then to encourage, even demand, that students do it too.

As previously mentioned, while the writer wishes to avoid a major discussion at this time about non-verbal communication, some mention of it must be made, particularly when discussing the important initial classes a teacher has with his new class. Again, the teacher should do his own homework as much as possible before his first venture into the classroom. The writer is convinced that, particularly in the critical opening classes, the tone the teacher establishes in the classroom is more important than anything he could say. In that sense, there is much truth to the contention that the most important means of communication is non-verbal communication. For example, approaching the classroom and new class with a certain degree of empathy, a sincere desire to teach and assist students, and the patience that good teaching requires, goes a long way in quickly establishing the relaxed and “open-minded” tone and atmosphere of the classroom. Students quickly “feel” these qualities and respond positively to them. They also note consciously, but probably mainly unconsciously, the reinforcing body language and gestures of the teacher.

A question where teachers often disagree is whether “controversial” topics should be introduced in class. Of course, the answer depends upon exactly what the specific topic is (e.g. the need to know the culture!), but this teacher has always found that those controversial subjects are usually very good topics to discuss, assuming the topic itself does not tend to intimidate any member of the class, or that the topic has not yet been “over used” (e.g. abortion). The only topic the writer tries to stay away from, unless students want to discuss it, is a topic relating directly to local political issues. He won’t avoid it if the subject is raised, but has found over the years that such topics really serve little purpose, even in terms of writing or discussion... unless we make the whole complexion of the assignment is at least somewhat humorous – e.g. National politician “x” has been hired by your company to advertise its new product, toilet paper. What advertisements, etc., would be best, how should politician “x” be used as spokesman for the product, what should be say, etc., and why do you say that?)

Likewise, even if students do not agree with a stance or attitude taken by the teacher (cultural difference?), if the tone of the class has been successfully established, this can quickly become a major building block for discussion and learning. For example, usually early in the semester in my classes, we have a class in which we discuss or write about “ghosts” and “things that go bump in the night”. Granted, within this general subject, there are many cultural differences and viewpoints of the subject! However, usually the majority of each class violently disagrees with the very idea, but the subject always generates a very vocal discussion, and a class where we all have a lot of fun with the topic. (So much so that, a number of times, classes have asked later in the semester to return to the subject.)

In such discussions, however, an interesting phenomenon seems to occur – students become so involved in discussing the controversial subject that, while speaking English, they frequently forget they are speaking English! As a result, the expression and communication in their second language is usually much better (they are more concerned with expressing themselves than they are worried about making errors), and the writer takes great delight at the end of class pointing out to them that, without realizing it and without worrying about speaking English, by simply trying to communicate with themselves (in their second language), their English was much better and relaxed. One can almost visibly appreciate the growth of self-confidence at that moment!

In conclusion, the main points to remember are for the teacher to remember and prepare classes, teaching materials, etc., to be simple and clear – simplify and condense, simplify and condense! Avoid as many negatives as possible and gear everything in the teaching environment to be relaxed and non-threatening. No error is fatal!

The Teacher: “The Basics” Of Cultural/Cross Cultural Communication

As mentioned earlier, much of the teacher’s success in a cross cultural situation depends upon how well he himself is prepared to encounter that situation. He must begin preparing for his classes, particularly the background of the students, the culture,

etc., almost from the first moment he arrives upon the scene. However, if this represents the “beginning” of his efforts, he is already too late!

The actual first step in the process begins years, even decades, earlier, both liminally and/or subliminally. Of primary importance is for a teacher to Know himself and whom he is, as well as his own culture, first! With that, he needs to recognize his own culture “in himself”, influencing him. Because any teacher is “inside” his own culture, recognizing its detailed, often subtle, effects upon himself often is exceedingly difficult, yet he, like everyone, is a product of it. Separating ourselves from it is impossible, nor should we, but other cultures should be recognized and respected as well, learned from, valued and appreciated, for their own sakes, in their own terms.

Another consideration, perhaps formed years earlier, involves the teacher’s answer to the question of whether or not he truly and genuinely likes people and is comfortable with them. One would surmise that for anyone in the teaching profession, the response to this observation would be readily apparent, but sometimes it is not! Students and others often tend to see our “comfort level” here much sooner than we do, and often the conclusion goes a long way toward determining teaching and learning efficacy.

As a result, within the above “preparatory” framework, “culture shock” is one of the first phenomena the teacher usually encounters, either in another country, or, to a lesser degree, in his own country when teaching groups representing other cultures. Often, students or neighbors will recognize culture shock within us before the teacher does, as well as some of its frustrations he may be feeling. However, culture shock need not be feared – but embraced! It is a natural phenomena and the first step toward understanding and living in another culture.

Although increasingly less so today, the manner of dress is also indicative of culture and cultural distinctions. Now the variation in clothing, colors, etc., are far more standardized and common throughout most countries and peoples of the world than ever before. A generation ago, for example, teachers were expected to dress much more formally than today. In some cultures (e.g. Japan), such means of dress are still expected. In other cultures, dressing casually, even by professors and professionals, is acceptable everywhere (e.g. China, America).

However, this is not to say that some degree of caution need not be taken. Some-time even colors can denote a certain meaning in a particular culture. In China, for example, white is often considered to be a color of mourning, yet white wedding dresses are worn by virtually all young Chinese brides. In Poland, an odd number of flowers are always given to, for example, a hostess – never an even number.

The question of eye contact, too, particularly direct eye contact, also varies from culture to culture. Although, this seems to be lessening, it is still important to consider and respect local customs when, for example, encountering people along the street, meeting University officials, etc. Today, it usually does not apply so much between students and teachers, though there are occasions and classes where this custom still exists. While the foreign teacher usually will be forgiven for breeching custom, he should also realize that if a particular students avoid direct gaze, there could be a cultural answer to the matter, even, perhaps, a sign of respect.

On the other hand, certain non-verbal actions transcend cultural barriers. First and foremost is the smile! While some cultures are more enthusiastic about shaking hands than others, the act of shaking hands is usually seen as a friendly and positive action in most cultures, so it is a very good way, especially in the beginning, of breaking or lowering subtle cultural barriers and reserve. Displaying open hands is also a non-verbal form of communication accepted and recognized almost everywhere.

Close Encounters of the Pre-Classroom Kind

These considerations reflect areas or topics which the teacher also needs to know about as soon as possible after arrival, and should be a consideration when the teacher is deciding whether or not to accept his teaching position. While they are similar in different countries and across many cultural lines, they often have their own subtle differences or reflect variations in ways of thinking. Ideally, their existence need not be a large problem for the teacher; in the worse instance, their misinterpretation and implementation can make his life a living hell – and as a result, the teaching experience as well. The best instance will not only make the teacher's experience in the position a tremendously positive one, but will greatly enhance and contribute to his teaching results.

Outside Support. In other words, outside of the department of the second language, how much does the University, especially its specific departments, support language acquisition and knowledge? While on a general, superficial level, most if not all will voice “total” support, but in sometime in the narrower scope, that is rarely the case. This was a particularly severe problem in China, but also a problem with some faculties in Gdansk too. The author's individual observations:

ASH – good support generally, though on occasion support could have been better.

ASB – excellent support, assistance, etc, upon request, whenever needed. Companies felt additional learning was (and is!) a priority, though there were occasional budget limitations.

AI – generally good, although budget crunching measures limited the best results possible. The degree of support often was underwritten by governments (local, State, and, to some degree, federal), so at times resultant effects were apparent, though usually not severely so, despite rising bureaucracy in some cases.

PSL – very good. Considering the school was quite limited in space and by financial appropriations, the College's priorities seemed always to be in the right place and was able to be very effective and supportative with what it had and offered.

CSX – generally, overall, fair-to-good. Support from the foreign language college as well as the International Peace and Friendship Institute was super excellent. Too bad some of the other departments and faculties were more considered with their own interests. Often the severest limitations were endemic – e.g. no heat whatsoever and broken windows during the winter in many buildings.

PSG – Generally, pretty good, particularly from the Foreign Language Institute, perhaps one of the finest I’ve worked with. Some faculties (e.g. Mathematics, Physics, Business) were also quite supportive, but others were not.

The Facilities Themselves. No facilities are the same, anywhere in the world, nor will they ever be complete enough to satisfy everyone, but they usually are not even expected to be 100% “state of the art” facilities, but some basic features should be present – availability (to teachers) of copy machines (which work!!!), at least a half-dozen PC’s for teachers (1 or 2 is not enough!!), a workable library (for students) and a reference library (for teachers). Moreover, are the facilities kept clean? Operating? Heated (in winter!)? Functioning restrooms nearby? Etc. Teachers should not have to pay for teaching materials out of their own pocket, but most teachers pay a large amount of out-of-pocket expenses for teaching aids, materials, etc.

ASH – Excellent

ASB – Very, very good

AI – Very, very good

PSL – Good to very good, few problems.

CSX – Depends – some buildings were terrible, others good, though nothing on a level to encourage learning. Copying, etc., facilities very good. University was usually open to purchasing the larger teaching aids (e.g. transparency machines).

PSG – Pretty good, though PC’s were not easy for teachers to use, and copying any teaching materials, etc., usually was next to impossible. If and when a PC could be used for any length of time for classroom preparation, lessons, etc., only rarely did printers have ink. Operating hours of some university facilities, libraries, etc., need to become much more realistic for an institution of higher learning.

“Politics” Within the School and/or Department. Like the “support” consideration, this is a critical criteria to assess before accepting a teaching position, and is extremely self-defeating for teacher and especially student in their quest for learning. However, realistically, any accurate evaluation can only be made when the teacher is on site.

ASH – Minimal, usually not a problem.

ASB – Rare.

AI – Some, usually “workable”.

PSL – Minimal.

CSX – Some. They seemed to grow as the year went on, but little existed within the International Institute or Language Department themselves.

PSG – Fairly minimal overall, virtually none within the Language Institute.

The Concept of “Time” – Individual cultures often look differently upon the concept of “time”, or more specifically, “punctuality”.

ASH – Somewhat weak identification of “time”. Punctuality was often a minor problem, though assignments were usually submitted on time.

ASB – Punctuality was rarely a problem. Rarely any tardiness, nor any waste of time. Assignments completed on time.

AI – Varied concepts, often probably more dependent upon each student's individual culture its philosophy. Generally, minimal problems with homework or preparedness.

PSL – Generally okay, but occasional tardiness. Assignments and preparedness were generally acceptable, though at times, quality suffered.

CSX – Punctuality and observance of "time" is very important in the culture. However, there was still minor tardiness problems growing in some classes.

PSG – A growing, weak identification, particularly with students in certain faculties. Very often class would have to be reorganized a bit due to the frequency of tardiness and punctuality. The majority seemed to observe their own "schedule" and were generally very lackadaisical in their approach to assignments and preparedness. Requested appointments with the teacher were rarely kept.

Societal/Cultural Sense of "Touch" – In this context, the criteria does not relate so much (if at all!) to any "touching" of students by the teacher *per se*, or vice versa, but rather about how the society as a whole seems to consider the concept of "touching". Some consider it to be not only insulting, but an invasion or threat to individual privacy and lack of respect. Related to this is the "closeness" through which that society or culture "permits" proximity between individuals when meeting, talking, etc., or in general interpersonal relationships and communications. These concepts provide the novice in that particular culture to be aware of native cultural or societal "comfort zones" in terms of individuality, as well as group dynamics.

ASH – Very little sense of limitation or taboo existed among American students in terms of the concept of touch in the context outlined above. However, increasingly, unwanted or unwarranted touching, particularly by a person viewed as an authority figure, is increasingly interpreted in this society as possible harassment or even as a threat. Americans, subconsciously, seek more space between individuals, even when speaking, than is present in most other cultures. The "normal" distance maintained by, for example, European speakers would definitely be considered to be threatening by most Americans.

ASB – Essentially the same as above, perhaps even a bit stricter.

AI – Although indications of the adoption of immigrants' new culture vary, the interplay between the immigrant's native culture and newly adopted culture is often apparent and often is indicative of the general level of "comfort" the student may already have in the "second" culture. However, in multicultural classes, great caution must be exercised in order not to draw overly broad conclusions; each student usually occupied his own, separate, position in this measuring scale.

PSL – In comparison with the other groups in this overview, Polish students maintained the greatest degree of physical proximity when interacting with each other. In this context, they probably are more representative of many European cultures in general, and speaking, standing, etc., in close proximity with each other never seemed to be a cause for concern or "discomfort". Likewise, within their own culture, "touching" seems to be much more accepted than in the other groups surveyed.

CSX – In considering the concepts of “touch” and “closeness”, Chinese students seemed to rank somewhere between the extremes of the American groups, and the Polish (or European) groups. However, more so than in America, “touch” clearly had a more culturally sensitive connotation – unwarranted or “casual” touching often is considered to be threatening and insulting with the Chinese culture. While the Chinese seemed to require a modicum of spacing when, for example, communicating with another, they clearly were closer to the Polish students in not “requiring” as much space as their American counterparts.

PSG – I noticed very little differences between either the the Polish student groups considered here.

The Cultural “Tradition” of Communalism vis-à-vis Individualism. As confirmed by a multitude of studies in such fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, history and more, the degree to which a given society or culture has been influenced by its general orientation toward a communal tradition, as opposed to an individual orientation, is an important consideration when planning classes or simple interaction within that class or culture. Indeed, the observation that a large degree of a teacher’s success in the classroom unless consideration is made for this cultural tradition is not unfounded!

ASH – One of the banes of teachers of American students is the frustrating attempts to stimulate a “group” or “communal” approach to learning in the classroom, specifically, group discussions, group projects, etc. With the overwhelming emphasis upon individualism in American culture, approaches which stress an individual approach, or even an independent approach (e.g. “Independent Study” often, by itself, is offered in American University curricula) generally fare far better and yield better results.

ASB – Since American business management has been stressing the “team” approach among employees, this approach is now more “acceptable” in the business world than it had been in the past. Actual results, however, are quite mixed and often many employees, privately, express their “dislike” or lack of enthusiasm for the “team” orientation. While there are several important reasons for this (including each company’s own approach, view, and support of it), the issue is somewhat debatable today as to whether or not the individualist nature of American business has indeed changed at all despite endless verbiage about “teams“.

AI – As mentioned above in other comments and observations, the orientation of a class of immigrants was usually quite varied, symbolic and reflective of their own native culture, but also somewhat indicative of what degree they have already been socialized and/or “accept” their second culture. However, usually no matter how “individualistic” most will become over the years in their adopted country, they still normally remain much more “communal” in their outlook and approach to life and tasks.

PSL – While learning can be successful with an “individualistic” approach, students here seemed to respond faster and more enthusiastically when a group or “communal” approach is employed. Sometime the teacher is well advised to think of the classroom not as a room for conducting classes, but as a kind of “intellectual com-

mine”. This is particularly appropriate when the teacher considered using a group approach or breaking the class of students into groups for discussions or projects. With few exceptions, Polish students in Leszno seem to accept this technique very enthusiastically and most worked well in groups.

CSX – In an apparent contradiction, despite thousands of years of communal living and traditions, in the Chinese classroom, a group or communal approach does not seem to yield any positive results at all! One of the most important reasons for this, and, indeed, a concept the successful teacher in Asia should always remember is the ingrained tradition of “saving face” throughout Asia. Often, this teacher has noticed that a Chinese student, or even a small group of Chinese students, will be much more willing to converse in English, for example, when speaking individually with the teacher; small groups, too, seem to be more willing to do this – but in the hall, or in many other places, as long as it is not in the classroom while class is going on. In other words, not among their general peers. Breaking up Chinese students into groups for individual group work in the classroom simply does not seem to work. In fact, I frequently found this to be quite counter-productive and often frustrating for both sides.

PSG – Like the PSL grouping, students in Gdańsk clearly felt comfortable with a group or communal approach, but in the first classes with each student group, the writer could see the influx of more “individualism” and a higher comfort level. By the end of the academic year, the teacher could easily conclude that either approach could be equally effective, depending upon how that specific approach was used to educate. Speculation for this change in outlook, whether possibly just be a sign of the specific emphasis of a given university, or whether indicative of a changing, more materialistic and, hence, a more “individualistic” society in general would spark many stimulating discussions. Future studies should be encouraged to look at this phenomena.

The Cultural, Communicative Educational “Confrontation” – Outside the Classroom

Before classes begin, the teacher new to the culture and the society in which he finds himself also is well advised to explore a few other issues. Knowledge of the new general background will go a long way to aid in meaningful class and lesson preparation as well as provide a general, realistic glimpse into the background of the teacher’s students.

The first consideration in this regard is the understanding of the educational system in which the teacher now finds himself, how it works, how native teachers teach, etc, as well as students’ own assessments of it. Foremost here is the teacher’s assessment of his students’ experiences with their former teachers (e.g. in elementary and secondary school, previous university experience) and the educational process. The writer is not suggesting that the “foreign” teacher needs to change necessarily (though he may well modify his approach and/or lessons to allow some degree of accommodation to enhance the adjustment, learning and teaching process), but simply being aware

of students' past learning experiences can provide many clues for the teaching process, resulting in more efficient teaching and learning, as well as a more enjoyable, less-stressful classroom experience for all.

This subject seems to be a good topic for discussion during the first, "get acquainted" class session. This teacher has often found that engaging students early in the semester to "help me understand your educational system and culture", often enables conversation to begin easily as students usually do not associate this communication with a formal second-language conversation class!

In terms of specific observations, students' general experiences with past teachers, particularly in a teaching environment or any encounter with a multicultural teaching approach and experience, the following may prove interesting.

AHS – Views about former teachers generally were quite varied, often depending upon the teacher's "popularity" and personality more than teaching skills, knowledge imparted and communicative skills. This was not always true, particularly among older or more advanced students who increasingly seemed to realize that often their "best" teachers had been those who were not necessarily "popular". In terms of exposure to teachers from other cultures, in America that still remains pretty limited for a number of reasons. However, while still slight, multicultural teacher contacts are slowly improving due to the increasing presence of other cultures on campus.

ABS – Because of the nature of this particular form of communication and education (i.e. within the company context), the "multicultural" encounter is rare, often non-existent. Within a business environment, about the only multi-cultural type of contacts most employees are likely to have is with customers, and the contacts usually are strictly over the phone today. Still, multiculturalism within the general business sphere is remaining fairly rare today and, when it exists, it is mainly due to the influence of Hispanic culture, language, and proximity to North America.

AI – Contacts with these groups (immigrant groups, services to/for immigrants, etc.) are, for most Americans, their only actual personal and living contact with another culture and modern, functioning language. Generally, these contacts are quite positive.

PSL – If native speaking teachers of English are considered (especially British native speakers almost entirely), students have much more exposure to another culture, teaching methods, etc., than their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Specifically, in terms of the College in Leszno, this was even more so since each year at least a handful of native teachers taught at the College while representing and exposing the students to other cultures. For example, each year there were at least a few native English speakers (who could be British, Canadian, American, etc.), as well as a few native German speakers for the German curriculum.

CSX – In China, teachers representing other cultures were few and far between, particularly teachers from non-Asian cultures. This situation is further complicated by the large size of the country itself as well as the vast number of educational institutions in China seeking native-speaking teachers or foreign teachers. Often when a foreign teacher arrives in the city he will teach (even in fairly large cities) he quickly discovers that he is the only "Westerner" in that city or, at best, one of a handful of them. This is

not necessarily a problem for the teacher in China, but the teacher needs to realize that for almost everyone he encounters, student and non-student alike, he is the first “Westerner” most Chinese have ever met or seen, so they will be curious, ask many questions, and some adjustment and understanding will be required. Still, if the teacher has the “right” personality and temperament (patience!), this situation can be tremendously rewarding both professionally and personally.

PSG – Due to the stature of this university and the cosmopolitan nature of the urban area, both students and the university were much more at ease with teachers from another culture (albeit another “western” culture not far removed from their own), and usually were able to deal with the issue with little or no problems (although, at the same time, the problems of “foreigners” with civic officials, the bureaucracy (often corrupt), etc., were significantly higher and provocative here than anywhere else this teacher I had ever encountered in the past, even in Poland. Many students (though not all) had already been abroad and not only had encountered other cultures, but had already adapted to them in varying degrees and an emerging multicultural view of the world.

A aside to this approach, but important for the teacher to consider, is the general background and experience the students have had with “foreign” teachers (in whatever venue). Often this can provide good clues on the effectiveness of former teaching plans and techniques and, if necessary, the current teacher can make minor (or major) adjustments to his plan, style, or approach, if necessary.

ASH – Prior encounters with learning about other cultures and languages by American students have been fairly limited. In fact, American students’ encounters and understanding in this area are the worst of any of the groups being cited. The study and appreciation of second languages are even worse, although in recent years there seems to be some degree of interest in Spanish and in some Asian languages (mainly Chinese and Japanese). Teachers native to other cultures in America tend to be encountered on occasion only in advanced (usually graduate) classes.

ASB – Although interest in other cultures and communication with them has already grown with students in company business courses, the opportunities to encounter other cultures, teachers, etc., has decreased even more than those within the ASH group above, unless their specific company is a multinational or does a significant amount of international trade and sales. The possibility of having a teacher from another culture is virtually non-existent in this group.

AI – Interest among immigrant students (and those teaching or assisting them) escalates tremendously upon involvement and interaction, and the students themselves often become more multicultural because of the associations, friendships and acquaintances they also make with their multinational encounters. However, encountering multicultural teachers here is virtually non-existent.

PSL – Because of students’ prior encounters and associations with other cultures, they seemed overall to have little interest generally in learning more about other cultures, or even encountering new cultures. In some areas, this seemed to be reflected in increased tolerance in certain issues, but in others, where one would, perhaps, expect

to witness increased tolerance and understanding due to experiencing other cultures, there seemed to be few signs of it.

CSX – Prior encounters with foreign teachers and cultures seemed to be treated very positively, even enthusiastically, by Chinese students. Chinese students seemed to be truly appreciative of their opportunity to have a foreign teacher, and to learn more about other cultures of the world. Undoubtedly, the overwhelming response continues to be very positive, though the overall style of teaching, compared to native Chinese teachers, demonstrates significant contrasts.

PSG – As mentioned above, the University here seemed quite blasé in terms of encounters with foreign teachers, at least early in the semester's classes, as was true with the University in general. There were individual exceptions, but overall, in the beginning, the foreign teacher was either accepted as "just another teacher" (no more, no less), and/or in some cases, little more than tolerated.

The second major consideration of more immediate preparation and class management is closely related to the first, but often more important. Specifically, the experience students had previously, while learning a second language is very important, and this is particularly true when dealing with the necessity of evaluating the quality of prior teaching and prior teachers. Since seeking this information is much easier if some tact and "diplomacy" is used, the teacher must be cautious or judicious in how the question is introduced. The indirect approach is best, and often, as "orientation" in the first class meeting, for example, asking a student about his prior classes, what was covered by his earlier teachers, etc. The individual responses often provided more than enough information to make an adequate assessment. The teacher must listen to what the student says, and what the student often does not say.

For example, in China, the overwhelming percentage of educators and professional Chinese, considered the teaching of English in China to be terrible, and Chinese English teachers, especially on the elementary and secondary levels, to be even worse. However, from the students' descriptions and comments, as well as via personal observation, this writer's general conclusion is that the general opinion is not true. In fact, this teacher has arrived at the conclusion that the quality of elementary and secondary school English instruction was actually fairly good, and in some cases, often very good. The problem was that there was (and continues to be) a terrible shortage of trained English teachers, and teaching aids and facilities are still almost non-existent at present in China. Still, although many of my students had not practiced or encountered much English since secondary school, I was amazed by how much often they did remember, and that the "rustiness", at times, was not much worse. Errors continued of course, but many, especially if they made even a modest effort, quickly drifted back to fairly good quality English, and many gradually progressed to being relatively advanced. In fact, the author continued to be amazed that he never heard a Chinese student make a mistake in the usage of "*a*" and "*the*".

During the beginning state of the semester or, hopefully, the week before classes begin, the teacher should also make an assessment of the facilities and "outside aids"

available to him – copy machines, transparency machines, general teaching aids, text books (and the “quality“), library facilities (especially in reference to what periodicals and books are available in English), computer/internet usage and availability, etc. Not only will this knowledge aid the teacher in making his own preparations for class, but should provide an accurate idea of what types of aids are available to students in terms of homework assignments, projects, and learning outside the classroom.

ASH – Generally, facilities, teaching aids, etc., are readily available and can be used with a minimum of “commotion”.

ASB – As above, facilities and teaching aids are generally very good, though because the environment is a business one and not, technically, an educational setting, there could be exceptions at times and, possibly, a teaching aid that is not immediately available.

AI – Generally, too, teaching aids usually are good and readily available, but there are increasing exceptions, depending upon the school or organization sponsoring the classes, and whether or not they are more concerned with limiting their budget than in providing educational assistance and support for learning.

PSL – Most necessary aids were available, though other facilities were wanting to some extent (e.g. severe limitation of library space created an overall acceptable, though somewhat limited, collection), particularly to exposure of British-English materials. Aids and facilities for other types of English were not common, and many materials were often dated.

CSX – Facilities, with some exceptions, were somewhat limited. However, some basic aids are readily available (e.g. copy machines – though as elsewhere, except at American schools, teachers have to pay for their own “aids”, copies, etc.), but other aids and facilities, often rather basic, were not easily available, if at all. However, this teacher’s Chinese university was quite open to providing what the teacher needed, if it was available in China.

PSG – Generally, facilities were good and available. Teaching aids were not. While the University has excellent multimedia teaching facilities, other aids – e.g. copying availability, computer usage (for teachers and for students), etc., were quite limited and, at times, non-existent in terms of a teacher being able to use them for classroom instruction. (Approximately 35–38 teachers had access to one computer, one copy machine (usually needing service and repair), and one printer (rarely with ink!). Teachers usually had to do any of these activities independently, often outside the University, and at their own expense.

Library facilities overall were very poor for an institution of higher learning, although the foreign language library in the Foreign Language Institute was “practical”, though very severely limited by space and budget. The main problem here was the extremely limited hours libraries and facilities were open and available.

Therefore, armed with information, assessment and evaluation of all the above criteria, environment and background, the teacher (and students) are ready for bonafide classroom teaching/learning encounters!

In The Classroom

There could be hundreds of categories with which to consider, evaluate and compare learning cultures and multicultural communicative encounters. Those indicated below are some that come immediately to mind, though the writer recognizes the existence of many more, and will be grateful for other criteria readers may suggest for comparison and analysis. As a general comment, for which the author yet has no “theory” formally developed, ASH, ASB and AI students seem much better behaved and considerate in the classroom and during class, particularly in terms of not interrupting classes – especially with speaking or whispering, showing a general lack of respect toward their fellow classmates, freely cheating and plagiarizing on homework assignments and on exams.

In a closer analysis, Chinese students probably rank a little worse than their Polish counterparts, though not by a great margin. When it comes to cheating, I did not detect any difference between Polish students and Chinese students – cheating, plagiarism, trickery, etc., was readily apparent frequently, and the overwhelming number of students saw absolutely nothing wrong with doing so. (In numerous cases, especially in China, teachers actively encouraged and assisted in the cheating.) This is not to say that every Polish or Chinese student cheats, but clearly the number of non-cheaters per class were pretty low!

Below, then, are a compendium of various categories of criteria, and the relationship of the groups to those topics.

General Overall Motivation to Learn

ASH – A general motivational assessment here is difficult to make; the range can be from “poor” to “very good”. As explained above, since students did not like having to return to English classes to improve their English (particularly their written English), overall motivation was “poor”, until they realized that if they failed to pass, they would have to leave the university. If and when they realized this, or were shown how mastery of written English would not only improve their scholastic success in other classes, but would enhance job opportunities and future careers as well, the motivation improved greatly.

ASB – Usually excellent! Students in the company classes already knew that their careers (and, probably, pay!) would be improved by mastering the course material. Likewise, most if not all already knew the value of the class even before the first class met, so the problem of motivation did not exist with this group.

AI – Similar to the above group, motivation to learn was simply not a problem. These students already knew the value of the class before the semester began. Perhaps there was a problem of “over- motivation” and expectations that were too high in this class! Usually the problem with groups like this was not of motivation, but in trying to keep the class in a relaxed, non-stressful atmosphere to enhance the learning experience.

PSL – Motivation was fair, in many cases, better than that. Most students were highly motivated, but a significant minority often were not. Usually the latter were in the final semester or two of their educational experience at the College, and were highly pessimistic about any job possibilities upon graduation. Lack of motivation quickly gave birth to a general lack of self-confidence, which, in turn, became a self-fulfilling prophesy when these students interviewed for positions.

CSX – Likewise, overall motivation was fair good, and generally somewhat higher than the previous group. Though there was some degree of pessimism regarding job prospects, lack of motivation here often could have other causes. A certain minority of these students did not think they should be taking a language class (or any class strictly outside their major field) and resented their Department for requiring them to take a second language (even though they had several years of it earlier). For the majority of students, homework was rarely completed in time if completed at all, and often their own Departments interfered with classes and class times, e.g. requiring them to do other things, have meetings, meet with advisors, etc., during class time.

Many Departments also told their students of language classes that no matter what occurred or what final grade they received, that Department/Dean would “override” the grade given and convert it into a very high one. Under these circumstances, unless a student truly wanted to learn, the motivation could never be very good. This teacher was very encouraged that so many of the students did really want to learn the language, regardless of the hardships and obstacles they faced in doing so.

PSG – Generally, motivation was good, though there were exceptions. As mentioned before, with the job situation in Poland so poor, and with so much corruption in the society in general, it is not surprising that motivation sometimes suffered in the crossfire and could not reach the heights of other of the teacher’s classes.

Ability to Understand the “Native Speaker”

ASH – No problem, for obvious reasons. (They too were native speakers!)

ASB – No problem, likewise for obvious reasons. (Also native speakers!)

AI – Poor to Fair, though a few in each class understood pretty well. Again, with so many students from different countries, cultures, backgrounds and circumstances, adequate, accurate conclusions are difficult to draw. The issue of understanding the teacher usually was mostly eliminated after a few classes together.

PSL – Excellent. Few problems.

CSX – Fair to Good, but much depended on the individual student and how much effort he was willing to make. In each class, especially by the second semester, there were 10–12 students (out of usually 45–65) who had become simply excellent in English. A few in each class simply made no progress at all because they were not motivated and resented being in the class, though usually understanding was not really a problem here, but for a handful in each class, problems continued.

PSG – Fair to very good, depending upon their experience and motivation. Many were very good, particularly if they made an effort to learn, so no real problems of understanding ensued. However, usually not long after the start of the semester, problems anyone would have with understanding largely disappeared.

Ability of the Teacher to Understand the Students

ASH – No problems, for obvious reasons.

ASB – No problems, for obvious reasons.

AI – The main problem at the beginning of a semester is that, once the new language begins to be spoken, students remain nervous and hesitant at the beginning, and do not speak clearly, and/or slur words. Improvement here can easily be tied to phonetic exercises during part of the class.

PSL – Usually excellent.

CSX – Usually good, but more work needed to be done with most of these classes, since they tended to speak unclearly. Another problem which manifested was the quiet tone of speaking – in some cases, actual whispering! Much of this seemed to be nervousness about speaking in front of peers and lack of confidence. Related is the tendency for Chinese to speak English often without much clarity in pronunciation.

PSG – Fair to Good. Improvements were visible through the course of the semester, though some students clearly needed to spend much more time with speaking clearly and a phonetics review.

Difficulty with Dialects, etc., in Their Own (Native) Languages

ASH – Not much of a problem, and if so, it was mainly with accent or the exceptional pronunciation of a word or two.

ASB – Even less of a problem here.

AI – Many! The teacher had to devote time each class to deal with phonetic problems or subjects, and be patient! Usually by the second semester the major problems had been eliminated or greatly improved upon.

PSL – Few if any problems. Students already were well versed in pronunciation and knew enough to be able to pronounce words they had never seen before correctly.

CSX – Because of the richness and diversity of Chinese and the Chinese, while not a great problem, this nevertheless sometimes caused some trouble, but nothing major which could not be overcome. An occasional, brief phonetics review in class seemed to help too. An interesting dilemma occurred when, otherwise fluent, a Master's student could be understood in English only with great difficulty and supreme effort. The teacher later learned that the student originated and lived in a very remote province in China, and that she had the same pronunciation problems in Chinese in her other classes.

PSG – Generally okay, though an occasional drill was sometimes needed to review pronunciation.

Culturally “Taboo” Subjects? (e.g. money, age, children, politics, marriage, personal feelings, religion, etc.)

ASH – No really taboo subjects, though students were often uncomfortable speaking about religion, for example; the topic of money is also frequently a sensitive one among Americans. Some students were hesitant to discuss their “feelings“, and, as a result, had difficulty speaking about such topics as marriage.

ASB – Not really, although in the business-related courses, many of the “taboo” topics did not arise in class, as discussions tended to be more related to the business-oriented subject matter.

AI – Many varied topics. This again depended upon the individual native culture, religion, etc., of the student involved. Some were generally always problematic (eg religion and often, in the beginning, more “personal“ topics), while others (e.g. money) were not. An interesting aside here (which itself also stimulated English conversation) was to ask, sincerely and respectfully, why a person of that culture felt uncomfortable speaking about the topic in question.

PSL – A few topics were rather “taboo” – mainly, in the beginning, politics, but in general, almost all areas quickly became “fair game”, particularly when students realized that the teacher would not “impose” his views, or even speak about his own views. However, this author found it interesting to note that in each class, some students (particularly male students) found it very difficult to talk about rather “personal” topics or beliefs, e.g. the issue of “equality” of the sexes. The same applied to a few of the Chinese students too.

CSX – A few topics were uncomfortable, although the main topic here was politics. Like their European/Polish counterparts, Chinese students simply saw nothing interesting or worth discussing about it, at least not until far into the semester and school year. Especially as the semester continued, even controversial subjects were not avoided and Chinese students seemed to respect more the opinions or beliefs of their colleagues, even if those views were not in accord with their own. By the end of the school year, though not true of society in general, most topics could be introduced and discussed intelligently in class.

PSG – Politics was the main arena of uncomfortability here, though there were often other topics which seemed to be surprisingly not well accepted (at least initially) by students, particularly if that area was outside what the student felt was his area of “expertise”. E.g. UFO’s and Outer Space Aliens. Sometimes “personal” topics were a problem, but as the semester progressed, most barriers were removed.

Abstract Thinking

ASH – In general, American students are very comfortable with abstract thinking and thought questions, often having had abstract, “essay exams” already in the 5th or 6th year of elementary school, and in secondary school and at the university having

them almost exclusively (except for the more empirical disciplines such as science, math, engineering, etc.).

ASB – Same as above, only more so, since their careers had required detailed, broad, “creative” and far-reaching abstract thinking and problem-solving.

AI – Somewhat okay, although often this mode of thinking was fairly new and had to be introduced by steps, and classes structured so abstract thinking could be practiced. However, as classes continued, students felt increasingly comfortable dealing with abstractions.

PSL – A problem initially, mainly through lack of any real experience in abstract thinking, and expressing themselves “abstractly“. By mid second semester, all students were comfortable with abstractions and had no problems.

CSX – Yes and No. Initially, formally, students had problems with abstract thinking in class – but somehow did not seem to realize that within their own culture, abstract thinking existed and flourished for many centuries, and that without realizing it, they thought abstractly in their personal lives quite often. Gradually, most seem to master the concept for the classroom too, particularly as discussion/writing assignments increasingly dealt with more abstract, “personal”, or somewhat sensitive topics.

PSG – Ultimately fairly good generally, though in the beginning, rather poor. However, through the semester, many were able to master abstract thinking very well, despite the overwhelming emphasis in their other classes for purely empirical thinking and reasoning.

The Trauma of Making a Mistake

ASH – Although no one likes to make a mistake or being erroneous about something, this is usually not a big issue or problem with American students. Learn from mistakes and move on.

ASB – Not a problem per se, though with this group, making an error often results in serious consequences and problems within their department or the company, and sometimes could result in significant financial loss. Still, while a concern, fear of not making a mistake did not hinder development or learning.

AI – Results varied, depending upon the individual student’s native culture and belief system. Gradual “improvement” as the class progressed generally, though comfort levels still varied between individual students.

PSL – Generally not too much of a problem, though sometime the “mistake” was internalized too much (often the student was too critical about his own error), so often the teacher subtly had to ameliorate the situation.

CSX – A major problem in the Chinese (and Asian) culture, particularly if the error is made in a public or semi-public setting, which is often the case, particularly in the classroom. The teacher here always needs to remember the concept of “saving face”, and its importance in Asian cultures, and try to avoid the situation as much as possible.

PSG – Generally not a problem, though, as above, with some students, an error could be internalized too much. Students seemed to look at the teacher to see how the teacher responded or reacted to errors and, if the teacher did not react strongly (or over-react!), the student felt better and less intimidated by the error.

Familiarity with Each Other’s Alphabet, Handwriting, etc.

Although this criteria is seldom thought of, it is a major component to good and effective teaching, learning, and communicating! In some cases, the handwriting problem emerges simply from the speed of writing, careless letter formation, etc., but at other times, despite “good” handwriting, often that culture’s process of teaching handwriting to children is the basis of the problem. This is a problem any teacher must deal with as soon as possible.

ASH – No problems generally. Usually problems here stem from sloppy or careless handwriting.

ASB – No problems. Successful business communication, record maintenance, etc., necessitates very clear and readable handwriting.

AI – Varied, but generally fairly good after emphasis and early class time is devoted to the topic. Even with different alphabets, often another student or two in the class has some degree of familiarity with another language and or alphabet, so often the problem does not result in a total obstacle, but with proper and frequent treatment, the problem usually improved as the semester progresses.

PSL – Generally okay, though handwriting was a problem on occasion.

CSX – Usually okay, though some real problems existed too, usually on an individual student basis. Luckily the present generation of Chinese are raised with the western alphabet as well as with Chinese characters. For the foreign teacher needing to read anything in Chinese, however, there are often major problems! With care, the handwriting issue usually disappears at some point into the first semester.

PSG – Generally no problem, though sloppy handwriting sometimes is.

Timeliness of Assignment/Homework Completion, Class Preparation, etc.

ASH – Generally good, and assignments are usually on time. However, some students are exceptions to that! Class preparation generally is good, but, again, with a few students, that is not always the case.

ASB – Quality and timeliness is very good, often excellent. Class preparation is usually very good too.

AI – Assignments are usually submitted on time, and the quality generally is good. Class preparation is generally very good too.

PSL – Although with exceptions, assignments and homework were usually on time and the quality was almost always very good. Although occasional lapses, class preparation usually was good too.

CSX – Timeliness was fair, though often assignments (sometime 50%!) were late, often by several weeks. Quality varied, usually depending upon how seriously the student was taking the class and how much effort he/she put into learning. Usually 20% of each class prepared well for class, and 20–25% of the class hardly ever prepared for the class.

PSG – Usually the quality of class tasks was pretty high, but the overall timeliness was terrible, and it was not at all unusual for 75% of the class to be several weeks late with assignments, if they completed them at all. Although some classes were exceptions, overall class preparations was pretty rare. Although there were exceptions, most preparation, deadlines, etc., were treated pretty lackadaisically.

Attitudes Toward Cheating and Intellectual Honesty

ASH – Usually pretty rare, and universities as well as the students themselves take a very harsh approach to it. Many universities have their own honor codes.

ASB – Very, very rare, virtually non-existent.

AI – Actually, in this group, there were very few instances of any of these problems.

PSL – Some instances existed, but with close and enthusiastic monitoring, problems were kept to a minimum.

CSX – Although there were some exceptions (usually the top students), cheating, if tolerated, was rampant and seemed to be accepted by the University. Some departments and professors were themselves complicit in it.

PSG – Fairly frequent, unless the teacher took a harsh and aggressive approach.

The Teacher As a Parental Substitute

ASH – Definitely not!

ASB – Absolutely not!

AI – Rarely, perhaps because with the trauma and difficulties encountered in their homeland, the immigration process, etc., the issue of maturity had already been dealt with.

PSL – Somewhat expected, though this phenomena seems to be much more reflective of the European/Polish approach to education in general, and/or the lack of self-confidence and responsibility instilled in most students at almost any prior or current level.

CSX – Frequent! This is indicative of many of the major problems of the Chinese educational system. Even graduate students are given little if any responsibility for anything, and continue to be treated like elementary or secondary school children in many ways. For example, Chinese Masters students must still live in a dormitory, are told what time they will be allowed to study, when they will sleep, even required to

have their beds made daily (and are inspected daily for it!). Where students are left on their own and given responsibility, many respond quite rapidly and effectively.

PSG – The subtle need for a parental substitute is quite apparent, much more apparent when compared to Polish students in Leszno, but not quite as far-reaching as with Chinese students. However, one cannot help but be amazed that some of Europe's best "technicians" are entering their careers with little if any ability to think abstractly and while possessing an undeveloped sense of responsibility and self-confidence.

"The Connection"! Mutual Reaching Out

At some indefinable, often at first unnoticed moment during the academic year, communication and understanding between teacher and students, both representing a "foreign culture" to the other, "clicks"! While communication problems still can, and often do, continue to exist, somehow the comfort level basis of communication has been firmly planted between the teacher-student. As a result, communication, teaching, learning, and/or understanding gradually become easier to understand and to respect. Usually this phenomena is so subtle as to be unnoticed, but sometimes some of the participants can almost "feel" the change when it occurs. Not only does this realization provide one of the most supreme moments in the teaching experience, but often later can give birth to life-long, close friendships. When this happens, the teacher still teaches, the students still learn, but now they are "one"!

More research into this phenomena could undoubtedly provide many great insights into the teacher-student relationship and, possibly, into inter-human communication as well. However, for our purposes here, perhaps a more meaningful way of viewing this occurrence is to consider the time span for this "connection" or "chemistry" to take place, and whether that chemistry is governed by individual cultures.

ASH – The time varies, as does the phenomena, though the actual "connection" seems to be more subtle in these groups. Perhaps noticing such a phenomenon inside one's own culture is more problematic. As a result, discussing the timing of the phenomenon is more problematic here also.

ASB – The mutual reaching out and understanding here usually occurs pretty quickly. This is somewhat less remarkable when one considers that the teacher-student relationship in these groups tend to be closer, and students and teacher usually have much more in common, especially the association of working for the same company, sometimes even in the same department. Often there has been prior interpersonal communication.

AI – Likewise, the "connection" here also occurs fairly rapidly, perhaps here due to the needs and desires (often seen by students as "critical") of the immigrant students to try to learn as much as they can and as well as they can, so that formal permanent immigrant and/or citizenship status can be obtained.

PSL – The timing period with these classes varied greatly with each individual class. With some sections, six weeks sufficed, and with other classes, almost the whole

semester was required. One class seemed to require almost a scholastic year. Moreover, for the first time the teacher noticed that in some classes the phenomenon seemed to be more pronounced than in others.

CSX – The timing of the result varied from class to class, but generally it occurred fairly quickly, by mid semester with the majority of classes.

PSG – Perhaps the majority of these classes were the slowest to witness the connecting phenomena. With only one or two classes as exceptions, the majority of classes began to show signs of the “connection” quite late in the semester, and one or two classes, while showing indications of adapting, never completely did by the end of the first semester.

Active Class Participation

Defining and/or trying to measure active class participation is, at best, controversial, and for sake of brevity, the author will not try to define it further, preferring instead to treat it in the same way an artist responded, when asked to define “art” – i.e. “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.” Several elements need to be considered when commenting on the general topic of active class participation because they all have an influence on participation, and the degree to which students do, in fact, participate. Size of class is an important ingredient; in general, the larger the class, the more difficult to stimulate any active and/or meaningful participation.

Often problem resolution also plays an important role in providing a comfortable and compatible background for students to participate. Construction occurring close to the classroom definitely does not encourage participation (or any kind of teaching or learning) in any way. Likewise, lack of heat, fresh air, distance to drinking or restroom facilities, etc., are problems which really need to be resolved before an atmosphere encouraging class participation can be created.

Other factors such as mutual respect, preparation by both students and teacher, even the time period of the class, contribute greatly to the degree of active participation in that specific class. A closer look and analysis:

ASH – The time required to create a participatory environment varied greatly, depending upon the class. Likewise, given the “individualistic” cultural aspect in this analysis, full and 100% active participation in the classroom, while improved, never reached totally active class participation. This is especially true in the English-Repeat classes, where the vast majority of the students did not want to be.

ASB – Active class participation occurred very quickly, probably for reasons already discussed in reference to this group, i.e. older and more experienced students; company – sponsored classes by which all knew could very well enhance their careers; and often a pre-class familiarity with other students as well as the teacher. Therefore, a much higher comfort level became an integral part of the class.

AI – Some participation occurred fairly quickly from the first class meeting. The reason for this, again, probably were the practical needs of English mastery by new

immigrants in order to improve their life experience in their adopted country as well as, ultimately, to obtain citizenship. After 2–3 classes, most students saw and understood the need to participate actively in class as the comfort levels increased.

PSL – Although participation was very slow to develop, as the classes “connected” (6–8 weeks with some classes), active participation gradually improved and increased.

CSX – Although approximately 10–30% of a class achieved an active participatory level, the others in the class did not to any regular level. However, certain topics stimulated more discussions than others⁴, and involvement and coaching from the teacher often could stimulate a greater degree of participation for a given class period. Depending upon the topic (e.g. a potential marriage partner, answering job interview questions, etc.), some very enthusiastic participate could occur.

PSG – With one or two exceptions (e.g. advanced business classes), active participation was very slow to develop, and often would not emerge at all without the teacher’s coaching. During the course of the first and second semesters, participation in the majority of classes improved slowly, but in one or two classes, progress was very minimal for the most part.

Concluding Observations

The teacher (and, as a result, his students) have a tremendous start toward achieving success if the teacher has had even a rudimentary background in one or more second languages himself. Ideally, the second language would be the first language of his students, but even if that is not the case, knowledge of any degree of another language can be valuable for the teacher in understanding the frustrations, confusion, and other questions and problems that can only emerge and be truly understood by another who also has undergone the same feelings and frustrations. As much as the teacher can read about such dilemmas, he will never fully understand them without having known the feelings of experiencing them personally. Then, incorporating this experience and knowledge into his teaching and classes, he can not only be more effective in the classroom, but an overall better teacher as a result.

This teacher came to China knowing no Mandarin Chinese at all. While he has received awards and much adulation for his teaching in China, he must admit to realizing that his effectiveness suffered. Even though he now knows a little Chinese, he realizes that he could be a much more effective teacher with a better knowledge of the students’ native language, and could explain answers to problems with that knowledge, using comparisons, contracts, or simply examples from that language while teaching a second language.

⁴ Interestingly enough, one of the most successful topics for Chinese students was a general discussion of kites, kite “technology” and their individual experiences. Fishing was another good topic, as well as topics relating to marriage, how to choose a spouse, qualities a spouse should have, etc.

In contrast, the author has a reasonable good knowledge of Polish, and that background (even if his students are not aware of it) has been of immeasurable help in teaching English effectively. For example, when a Polish student asks a question about English (or about something else, but using English) about a difficulty or with some errors, because the teacher knows Polish, he has a very good idea what the student is trying to say, or why the student is confused and having difficulty. Under these circumstances, preparing effective classes, assignments and exercises, or simply discussions are easier, resulting in a much better learning, less stressful atmosphere for the student.

Likewise, when students realize that the teacher has a language background, they seem to have much more confidence in him, and the teaching relationship (e.g. the "connection" mentioned above) occurs sooner in the learning experience. Teaching certificates, designations, etc., have nothing to do with the question of who is a good teacher, what teaching and communication skills one possesses, and certainly not with the question of teaching effectiveness. Likewise, methodology is not a substitute for teaching, nor are the books, aids, etc., which may be used, but hopefully not replace, the active role of the teacher in the classroom.

As mentioned in the outset of this article, the author does not claim nor imply any inside knowledge of the question of interplay between culture and communication, on the one hand, and learning in a foreign or multicultural environment on the other. The subject area is exceedingly broad and complex, and realization has barely emerged yet into the mainstream of the teaching environment. This exegesis is merely a compendium of observations this teacher has made while teaching within several broad cultures. He is making no attempt to define the comments and criteria examined, but simply offers them as a kind of framework which will, hopefully, create awareness in other teachers and/or elicit contributory comments or ideas for further examination of this general field.

Teaching in "foreign" environments or in multicultural settings can be tremendously rewarding for both students and teacher. However, eventually all come to realize that one only gets out of the learning effort and environment what one puts into it and contributes to it. If done "correctly" and effectively, the results can be truly great and, perhaps, almost unbelievable. An important point to remember is that in the learning environment in another culture, both students and teacher are "learners", and both students and teacher are "teachers".

Within the multicultural arena too, a good guiding principle is to realize that there are no "rights" or "wrongs", only varying ways of looking at complex philosophical, social, etc., questions, or even defining them. However, discussing these issues alone should be viewed as a very positive step to learn more about another culture while sharing similar values of one's own. In this context, there are no "losers", only winners.