



Cutting in Line in China

Teaching cultural understanding through language

By Richard Peters

It was a chilly January morning when I stepped into Valerie Chu's language studio, which is a 30 floor elevator ride up in an office building tucked amidst the towering skyscrapers of downtown Guangzhou, China. A half dozen international school teachers circled a pair of tables, notebooks open and translators ready, as they waited for Valerie to finish passing out flashcards which showed common local foods.

Today's lesson was about how to get what you needed at a Chinese convenience store. Using one student as a model she acted as cashier, asking if they wanted their instant noodles cooked or how much money they wanted on their phone card. She moved quickly from one student to the next and then back again, each time engaging them in increasingly more difficult scenarios until they were ready to practice with each other in a game format. At one point a student joked that no one had

tried to cut in line yet – a common occurrence anyplace in China – and this quickly led to a flurry of questions about Chinese culture and etiquette pertaining to lines.

Cultural differences between China and the west are vast, and being that most of these students were recent arrivals to the country, they had a long list of "In China why do people..." questions every week. Valerie takes these inquiries seriously, often blending them into the lesson in order to explain. So why do people cut in line in China?

According to Valerie, in a country with a relatively non-confrontational populace, and lines that never seem to end, people are always trying to find a shortcut. It's something that frustrates both local and foreigners alike, but most of the time locals won't say anything. This whole scene was then taken into account during a role-playing session where they learned how to politely tell a person they can't cut in line using Chinese.



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What I realized in watching this lesson was that Valerie was teaching more than just language, she was teaching expatriates how to be citizens of her culture. Through her classes they developed an understanding of the place they were living, and the people they were living alongside, that would help them act in a more respectful manner, and also help take an active role in making things better for everyone. This sort of human relations approach helps these students look at their own preconceptions, as well as understand how those not of their culture feel about the same situation (DeMarrais, LeCompte, 1990). While her student don't need to agree with the way things are done in the country, they now can understand why it's done that way and why people are hesitant to do anything about it.

This is something that I encounter in my own classes where 100% of the students are Chinese, but instead I am preparing them for life in American or England, although not directly. I answer questions from those who are curious and also attempt to model good behavior as well.

Stephen Chow

Connecting Cultures through Language
By Nelly Corgan

Between on and offline content people are spending an increasing amount of time in front of screens, and children are no exception. There are apps, Youtube channels, and over 50 television stations all geared towards them, and the rate at which such media is being added is only increasing (Stack, Kelly, 2006). In the future, if it isn't already for many children in the western world, this media could be their primary pedagogue (Stack, Kelly, 2006). To many this idea might seem horrifying, but it has a silver-lining, because as much as many might look unfavorably upon mainstream media and pop culture, it can be used in an educational setting to a teacher's benefit.

I recently had a chance to see a successful mix of pop culture and technology in an adult Chinese language course run by Valerie



[Stephen Chow in Kung Fu Hustle – Chow is a staple of Hong Kong cinema and is well known through Asia for his numerous comedies]

Chu. It started when a conversation about how humor differed in China and the US spun off into a conversation about the infamous Stephen Chow. He has done dozens of movies and TV shows since the 80s, with a number of them bearing the slapstick and irreverent humor that made him so famous. Valerie used this opportunity to get the students to look up clips on Youku or Youtube, and then opened up a discussion about the content and language, such as slang they might not recognize. The students, most of them who are still in their 20s, found it entertaining, and also seemed to pick up a number of new terms, albeit some rather inappropriate ones.

What I saw with this was the ability to use pop culture to engage the students, promote discussion, and to do it on the fly. This last point is something I think is incredibly important, as we have never in the history of education had this ability to the level we have it now. Students and adults alike can now follow ideas and topics almost as fast as their imagination can generate them, all because of the smartphones, tablets and the internet, which they carry

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Everywhere with them. Why shouldn't this be something that we utilize in the classroom? The internet, social networking, online forums and the ever-changing, ever-growing media of pop culture are evolving the way our students learn, and educators would do well to catch up (Schuck, 2012).

There are many arguments against using pop culture in the class, but in light of the benefits these excuses fall short. Many are concerned with parents not approving of the content brought in either by the teacher or the students. Some say that the influence of technology in the classroom breeds a sort of flighty and inconsistent behavior from

students.

Lastly, many teachers are concerned that they don't understand the pop culture well enough to integrate it. The first two issues are matters of informing administration and parents of your plans, and the second of adjusting your lessons to suit this flighty and inconsistent behavior.

With the third issue one might find some difficulties, because how does that 55-year old teacher know a thing about the media of their 14 year old students? The good news is that they don't have to. These expert teachers can provide the lesson framework in which students can incorporate their own culture (Callahan, Low).

In Valerie's language class the students would later introduce her to American and British culture through clips similar to Stephen Chow's, and they'd discuss the content of these videos using both English and Chinese.

What all this really drives home for me is that if educators are going to be successful in the future they are going to need to be as flexible as the students they are teaching. They will need to learn to incorporate technology and media's influence into their lessons, and allow students to explore these connections. The more teachers push against children's natural tendencies the less successful they will be.

Media Influence and Your Students

By Wendy Kong

After a long Friday at work, myself and four colleagues boarded a plane to Mumbai, India for a conference on cross-curricular development put on by the International Baccalaureate program. From the airport to the hotel was a blur of colors and endless motorbikes and rickshaws. Hawkers poured through the seams between cars at every stoplight,

tapping on our window, presenting us with cheap plastic trinkets, all likely made in China where we'd just flown from. We barely had a chance to become comfortable in the hotel restaurant before we found exhausted and made our way to our rooms in preparation for the first of two solid days of professional development.

The first day of the conference we met in the massive auditorium of an international school which had over 2000 students. We were then broken down into smaller groups and sent off to classrooms with an itinerary for the next two days. Our lecturer was a bright and bubbly woman who talked quickly and positively about cross-curricular examples she had

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seen work in other schools, but each one left me thinking, “What about math?” I’d always found it difficult to fit math in cohesively with other subjects in the same way that language and history can so easily blend. There is an obvious connection between math and science, but otherwise it seemed that I was shoe-horning it in for the sake of a directive from the administration or department head. We were part of the way into the morning, going through an activity when I asked her, in a side conversation, about this. She responded in a way similar to sentiments echoed in the book *Sociocultural research on Mathematics Education: An international perspective*, which says that the strength of mathematics lies within its ability to empower people to analyze and critically reflect on democratic ideals, making well-informed decisions for the betterment of society (Atweh, Forgasz, Nebres, 2001). For a moment an alarm went off telling me that she was deflecting my answer with the broad brush of teacher-speak, but she then elaborated further, saying that the strength of math is not calculation, but the interpretation of these calculations. And not in being able to solve problems, but in the way that learning a new language, one based on logic and reasoning, can change

the way you look at the world. Mathematics is already integrating itself into other classes, we just need to learn how to make that more pronounced. This stuck with me for a long while, fueling my interest in how I can get students to think beyond the numbers and calculations to what exactly math is doing for them, because so much of it is invisible.

The world is changing, and we are attempting to reach different objectives with the way we educate. “Mathematics, as one of the curricular areas that is more directly connected to scientific and technological understanding of the world, plays an important role in the achievement of these goals” (Atweh, Forgasz, Nebres, 2001). Each day we are bombarded with stats, figures, and polls, and without math we’d be hard pressed to make heads or tails of them. Numbers and their interpretations are playing center stage as data and computing power becomes more readily available, and it’s important to understand that it’s our level of mathematical literacy that will help us make sense of them, and which will ultimately determine if we, as citizens, will be able to affect changes that are best for us and those around us.

High-stakes Testing, a Necessary Evil?

By Nelson Riley

We are quickly approaching that special time of year when teachers get nervous and students bemoan the approaching barrage of testing. But what really happens when we rely too heavily on these tests?

It has been noted that, “Some studies have found that high-stakes testing can narrow the curriculum, pushing instruction toward lower cognitive skills and distort scores” (Darling-Hammond, 2004). As a teacher I have found this to be true, not just in state schools, but in the international schools I have worked. These schools often adhere to IB or other standards in order to apply for college admissions. Like their state-side counterparts, everything eventually becomes focused on getting those numbers up.

In the future I would like to see testing become only one component by which we judge a student. It’s about time we have a more holistic approach that takes into consideration all that makes up these students. Portfolios and other ways of measuring is much better.

Does Private Financing Impact Student Achievement

By Ally Bell

In a small town against the South China Sea is Alice Zhu's school. Spread out on a large campus with red brick dormitories and tall trees leaning over cobblestone walkways, it looks, from the outside, idyllic, but as with any school issues brew beneath the surface.

The campus itself is shared by two college preparatory high schools and a smaller middle school, with almost all students boarding there Monday through Friday, and a handful of them staying full time. These are private schools that rely on middle and upper middle class families who want their children to have a leg up when applying to foreign universities in Britain, Australia, Canada and the US.

Alice's room is neatly organized, but somewhat Spartan, though there are materials posted up for necessary equations and vocabulary. The room is shared with other teachers so it's hard for her to make it her own, even though she is the one who primarily uses it. When I arrived to observe her class I was struck by how well-behaved most of the students were. For the most part classes ran smoothly and the general atmosphere seemed congenial.

Later, when Alice and I sat down to talk she gave me the rundown of the pros and cons associated with working at a private school.

Private schools she said, are in many ways, much more a business than they are a school. That's not to say great learning doesn't happen, because it does, and many private schools do an excellent job of producing quality students and citizens, but at the same time the administration has more on their plate than simply education. For starters, they are frequently concerned with enrollment numbers, marketing and school image. This can mean putting on a show for parents, or participating in events that seem somewhat hokey, but are meant to show multiculturalism and student success. To parents this seems genuine, but for many teachers they can't help but feel it's just another photo op for next year's brochure. Alice said that she doesn't necessarily feel this way, but has heard other teachers express this sentiment more than once.

Another thing that has to be taken into account is pleasing the parents and the students that are already there. Because of this schedules can be shifted and students can be

pushed into a class that they shouldn't be. For example, a parent may want their child in the higher level class despite their low performance. Later, when they don't pass their final exam because the material was above their level, the teacher may be held responsible. These types of things are common, but they are present enough to be a concern.

Alice noted that her school was not technically an international school because it admitted only Chinese students, but it still adhered to many of the norms of other schools, such as being selective with admittance. Many international schools don't accept handicapped or children with learning disabilities, saying they do not have the facilities to take care of such children. Others won't even take local students. (Cuellar, 2014).

After I left campus I thought about the impact these things might have on a teacher's level of motivation

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and on the education a student may receive. As more students and parents treat education as a service, will more teachers treat their job like those in the service industry? In international schools it is much more this way, with teachers leaving mid-year, sometimes without notice, and others, under contract, skating by on the bare minimum. At the same time these schools do also attract higher quality teachers who are looking for better pay and more reasonable workloads. So what it comes down to for many teachers that look to the

success of international schools, especially when it comes to promoting vouchers, is how far are they willing to go? To what extend should money and marketing play in a school, and how could it affect hat desire for children to learn?



The Nansha Preparatory Acadmey in Guangdong, China

The China Divide

There is a gap between the China and American education systems. You may have read in the news about recent tests scores, and just how far behind the US is, but there is another gap that goes beyond these numbers, and it comes in the way the students learn. While Chinese students often emerge from school with a much wider base of academic knowledge, it does come at a cost.

I've observed classes in local Chinese schools taught by Chinese and westerners, as well as Chinese and western teachers who are working in international schools, and the differences in instruction are significant. If you were to enter a Chinese high school, for example, you could mistake some classes for a college lecture, as class sizes can number 40, 50, or even higher. Teacher-led instruction is prevalent, and material is generally covered at a

quicker pace, as tracking is common in most every subject. In addition, high school, or at least the last three years of it, are not free, and this seems to add another level of pressure for both parents and students.

The Chinese system, which does produce a high level of academically equipped students does so at the cost of limiting the experience with other forms of education, such as social education, which helps students learn a number of valuable skills such as cooperation, tolerance, and patience. That is not to say students in China are uncooperative, intolerant and impatient, but that they have not learn to navigate certain social situations that students in the west have. Mixed-level learning, group projects, class structures and rules formed by students and teachers together, are rare. None of this causes problems if students stay in China, but it can cause issues when students study abroad.

In a recent interview with Alice, a colleague, who was kind enough to let me observe her class, we talked about how her students, most of whom are bound for schools outside of China, were going to adjust once they left. She worried that too many of them would do what most Chinese students do and stick with other Chinese. That they'd miss out on the relationships in American and British universities between student and professor that often lead to internships and jobs, and even more importantly on the relationships with other students that would help them break out of their "China bubble" (Zhang, 2014).

This has become a growing concern on a number of college campuses in the US who are taking in more and more Chinese students. The concerns are that they don't mingle with other students and don't work well when projects necessitate teamwork. That they don't really become participating citizens of the school and that they find interacting with their professors difficult (Zhang, 2014).

Alice isn't surprised, and says that this is less a cultural difference and more a product of the way classes are run in China. In school students focus on their studies, and the teacher is there to help them during class time, but otherwise they have other matters to attend to.

This got me thinking a lot about how I teach in class, which is in the same school as Alice, and how my job is not just to teach mathematics, but to instill in the students a sense of ownership that they can later apply to their university life. When I start next school year with my new homeroom and new classes I am planning to make some changes that will hopefully make students more receptive to engaging in the university culture outside of China

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