

## **A Contrastive Analysis of Traditional Chinese and Western Teaching Styles – A Case Study**

In the process of second language teaching, both Chinese and Western teachers show their distinctive teaching styles as demonstrated by their different teaching approaches and roles. Generally speaking, the mainland ELT teachers prefer a more instructor-centered style of class management than Western teachers do, which is characterized by the form of “knowledge transmission from teacher to students” (cited in Xiao, 2006), while Western teachers tend to take a communicative approach and encourage students’ participation in class. There is no doubt that different teaching styles can exert different impacts on students’ learning processes and outcomes. Since teaching styles have become particularly important in the context of teaching English as a second language, identifying the teaching style can help language teachers, especially Mainland ELT teachers, gain a clearer insight into the embedded strengths and weaknesses so as to ensure positive learning outcomes and effective teaching.

### **1. Literature Review**

“Teaching style is a teacher’s individual instructional method and approach and the characteristic manner in which the teacher carries out instruction. Teachers differ in the way they see their role in the classroom, the type of teacher-student interaction they encourage, their preferred teaching strategies and these differences lead to differences in the teacher’s teaching style” (Richards et al., 2005, p. 699). The difference between traditional Chinese and Western teaching styles, to a large extent, can be

traced back to cultural influence. German linguist Hofstede (1980) points out the three cultural dimensions which affect Chinese L2 teaching and learning, including the “Power Distance Dimension” of Chinese teachers’ authority image and students’ submissiveness in the instructor-centered classroom, and “Collective-Individualistic Dimension”, focusing on the Asian value of seeing individuals as an inseparable part of an in-group and the Westerners’ stressing individual goals, needs and rights rather than the community (Hall, 1977; Hofstede, 1980). In addition, teaching styles may vary from person to person, and there is no absolute criterion for judging a good style of teaching. The traditional Chinese teaching style may be an effective way to enable students to grasp fundamental facts, grammatical rules or sequences, while the Western teaching style emphasizes student engagement in classroom activities and fosters their critical thinking and independent learning. When a teaching style matches the learning style, students can gain more knowledge, obtain more information and perform far better (Lage & Treglia, 2000). However, since the major goal of any effective course is to develop students’ ability to communicate in the target language (Davies & Pearse, 2002), a flexible and dynamic teaching style will enjoy popularity among students and the traditional teaching style, characterized by its monotonous teaching approach and teacher’s authoritative roles, will inevitably fail to meet the needs of students in modern times.

## 2. Methodology

This research project is a case study which aims at investigating and analyzing the differences between traditional Chinese and Western teaching styles. In order to better understand the purpose, the main focus is on different teaching approaches and teacher’s roles performed by both Chinese and Western teachers. In addition, two questions were posed in the case study:

1. In what aspects are Chinese and Western teaching styles different from each other?
2. What can mainland ELT teachers gain by analyzing teaching styles?

### 2.1. Instruments

The study was viewed as a qualitative research, since it could present a more accurate picture of reality and reveal more complexities (Cohen et al., 2000; Merriam, 2001; Freebody, 2003; Wen, 2004). Pre-interviews

and participant observations were used as data-collecting instruments. In the research project, we chose the former to obtain useful information about the subjects' syllabuses and objectives of their writing course, their teaching approaches and the students' academic performance. The interviews lasted about 5 minutes each, which allowed us to "fish" the subjects' personal styles, motives and feelings based on their tone of voice, facial expressions, etc.; thus, we could probe certain information (Moser & Kalton, 1971; Cohen, 2000; Bell, 2005). In addition, classroom observation was an important part of the study, since this naturalistic approach allowed us to observe what actually happened in class, and consequently obtain valuable data (Allright, 1988; Bell, 2005). The classroom observations averaged 50 minutes in length. Both pre-interviews and classroom observations were audio- and video-recorded for later verbatim transcription and analysis. In this case study, different teaching styles constituted independent variables, in which different teaching approaches and teachers' roles were variations. The dependent variable is mainland ELT teachers' self-improvement and more effective teaching. In other words, an in-depth study on different teaching styles can provide mainland ELT teachers with a clear insight into the nature of a teaching style and at the same time enable them to reflect on their teaching performance in order to enhance their professional development and pedagogical outcome.

## 2.2. Subjects

**Table 1.** Background Information on the Two Subjects

Subjects	Sex	Title	Academic qualification	Years of teaching	Teaching courses
CT	F	Professor, dean	Master	24	Writing
WT	F	Assistant Professor, program leader	PhD	20	Writing

Note. CT and WT are short forms of the Chinese teacher and the Western teacher.

The subjects involved in this case study were two English language teachers with their 31 English major students from two universities in mainland China and Hong Kong. The two subjects' academic qualifications and training were in English and their experience of teaching English was 24 and 20 years respectively. The Chinese teacher obtained a Master degree in English literature in China and was professor and dean of the English department; The Western teacher from the UK had a Med, PGCE and PhD in education. She was assistant professor and program

leader in MAELT in the English department of a university in Hong Kong. The choice of observing their classes was based on the fact that they were both expert teachers, one a program leader of MAELT, the other the dean of the English faculty, and they taught first-year college students writing during the observation.

In addition, the subjects selected in this case study constituted a convenient sample simply because the Western professor was working at the same university in Hong Kong where I was doing my master's degree in English language teaching and the Chinese professor was my colleague before I came to Hong Kong for further studies. However, owing to the fact that the sampling was not randomly selected, no claim is made herein that the two main subjects chosen constituted a representative sample of all college English teachers in L2 teaching.

### 2.3. Ethical Considerations

As a qualitative researcher, I adopted three safeguards to protect the subjects of the study. Firstly, the research objectives were honestly articulated to the subjects in person so that they could understand and express their concerns. Secondly, written consent was obtained to conduct the research and to film the classes of both teachers. Lastly, to ensure confidentiality, the names of the two subjects were changed simply to "Chinese teacher" and "Western teacher".

## 3. Data Analysis

The study reveals that generally both Chinese and Western teachers were deeply involved in their instructions. The objectives of the writing session were clearly introduced and the class time was used effectively. However, a closer look at their classroom teaching and a careful analysis of the data indicate that there was a striking difference between traditional Chinese and Western teaching styles as reflected by the subjects' teaching approaches and teacher's roles.

### 3.1. Teaching Approaches

In his review of the development in teaching writing, Platridge (2004) has listed different approaches based on a chronological order: controlled composition from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s; product approach in

1960s, process approach in the 1970s and genre approach, which is regarded as the most effective approach to this day.

The Chinese teacher adopted the traditional product approach, in which students were encouraged to mimic a model text (Steele, 2007). The teacher organized her teaching plan in 5 stages:

- Stage 1. Introduction to classification and its purpose initiated by teacher's questions and students' answers
- Stage 2. Model text – “The Two Types of Clouds” was read.
- Stage 3. Organization of ideas by offering strategies in doing classification
- Stage 4. Teacher's deconstruction of the model text
- Stage 5. Mimicking the model text in groups with the teacher's feedback

One of the encouraging findings is that the Chinese teacher did not dogmatically follow the content of the product-driven approach as was demonstrated by her encouraging the students' collaborative work in class. The product approach, as Steele (2007) mentioned, focuses on the layout, style, organization and grammar. In addition, the exposition's features are very much fixed. Therefore, the approach adopted by the Chinese teacher may help students in handling this type of writing tasks. However, the book-based, instructor-centered approach also has its defects. In the whole session, the teacher controlled the flow of the content which the students were expected to receive and absorb. The monologue-like instruction created a static and monotonous learning atmosphere, which prevented the students from active involvement in learning.

By contrast, based on the classroom observation, the Western teacher's way of teaching was different from that of the Chinese teacher and the effect produced was also not the same accordingly. In her teaching of writing, she employed a genre-based approach, centered on the language and discourse of the text, and the context in which the text was produced (Paltridge, 2004). In her writing session, the teacher explicitly explained to her students the “code of conduct” through a genre-based Curriculum Cycle (cited in Gibbons, 2002, p. 60). In the course of teaching, the teacher followed the stages identified by Derewianka (Gibbons, 2002):

- Stage 1. Building background knowledge of the code of conduct
  - Based on a video in a previous lesson about Jamie Oliver, a famous chef who wanted to enact a code of conduct for his new chefs, students were encouraged to share other information on the type of genres, the nature of the code of conduct, authentic materials from interviewing Jamie and the model text.
- Stage 2. Modeling “Boeing Code of Conduct”
  - Choose “Boeing Code of Conduct” as a model text which was similar to the target one.

- Deconstruct the text together with students by identifying the three stages from the text, students' marking interesting word features like negative words "inappropriate", "violation", "conflict of interest" and the negative polarity and pointing out some grammatical features by using "meta-language" (Gibbons, 2002).
- Stage 3. Writing in pairs

In the process of teaching writing, the Western teacher provided scaffolding for her students at each step until they gained the competence to do the writing task independently. What is more, active interaction between T-S and S-S created a very lively and dynamic classroom atmosphere. However, it would be much better if a teacher-guided joint construction was added to the teaching procedure, because it is viewed as a very important stage in the Curriculum Cycle, from which students can get a clear idea of both process and product in the writing course (Gibbons, 2002).

### 3.2. Teacher Talk Time

There is no denying the fact that in the process of classroom teaching, teacher talk plays a very important role in guiding students' learning. However, if the classroom discourse is dominated by teacher talk, students will have less chance to practice themselves in the target language. Harmer (2000) believes that it is a vital part of a teacher's job to offer opportunities for students to express themselves in class. In his opinion, Teacher Talking Time (TTT) should be minimized while Students Talking Time (STT) should be maximized. Zhao (cited in Hu, 2007) in her study of analyzing Teacher Talk argues that in a teacher-centered classroom setting, TTT usually occupies 70%-90% of the total classroom discourse. Thus, the students hardly have an opportunity to engage in classroom activities and express their viewpoints in class.

The data from classroom observation indicates that compared with Western TTT (47.6%), Chinese TTT covered 77% of the total class discourse. As for STT, Western STT (54.2%) was twice the amount of the Chinese's and occupied more than half of the total discourse. Therefore, students in Chi-

**Table 2:** Discourse Amount

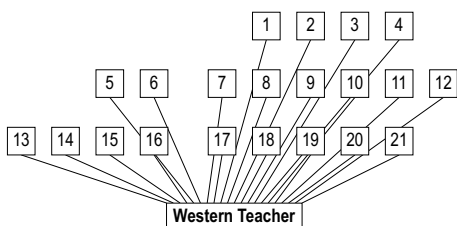
Discourse Amount Teacher	Overall Time t (min.)	Total Discourse Amount		TTT		STT	
		t (min.)	%	t (min.)	%	t (min.)	%
Western teacher	50'	42'	84	20'	47.6	22'	52.4
Chinese teacher	50'	44'50"	89	34'50"	77	10'	23

nese teacher’s class had less opportunity to participate in class activities and the development of their inter-language will be halted accordingly.

### 3.3. Teacher-Students’ Interactions

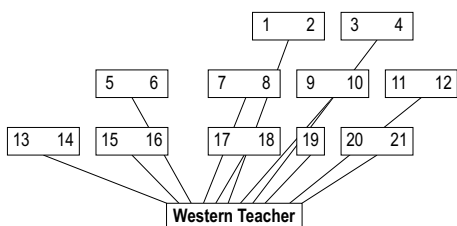
Language teaching is a continuum of teachers’ instructions and students’ learning, the essence of which is interaction. Based on this, modern pedagogy indicates that the process of language teaching is T-S communication, active interaction and mutual development. Appropriate and manifold interactions can make lessons more lively and dynamic than traditional teacher-centered, students-silent lessons (Davis & Pearse, 2002). During the classroom observation, we found that the interactions between T-S and S-S in the Western teacher’s class were very impressive.

*(The Western teacher)* T-S: individual interaction (25 times)



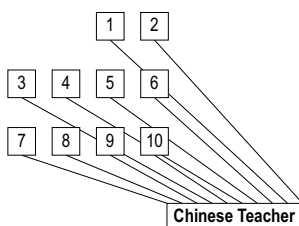
**Diagram 1:** Individual Interaction between T-S in Western Teacher’s Class

*(The Western teacher)* T-S: interaction in pair work (12 times)



**Diagram 2:** Interaction between the Western Teacher and Pairs

*(The Chinese teacher)* T-S: individual interaction (13 times)



**Diagram 3:** Individual Interaction between T-S in Chinese Teacher’s Class

From the above diagrams, we can conclude that the Western teacher involved herself in interacting both with individuals (25 times) and pairs (12 times). Besides, two students came to the board, marking language features from the text on the overhead projector with the help of others. In contrast, the Chinese teacher's interaction with her students only amounted to 13 times.

### 3.4. Teacher's Roles

Clearly, a teacher should assume great responsibility to create a context in which students' thirst for knowledge can work most effectively. The following table shows the different roles both Chinese and Western teachers performed in their writing sessions

Table 3: Teacher's Roles

<b>The Chinese teacher</b>	<b>The Western teacher</b>
An authority figure	A facilitator of learning
A teacher of the textbook	A developer of materials
A bystander of group work	A director and involver of group work
An island in the learning community	A psychologist, sister and educator

As for the Chinese teacher, she appeared to be an authority figure (Hedge, 2002), who stood still behind the platform throughout the whole session. The platform was like a gap separating her from her students and hindered meaningful interaction between the teacher and her students. Standing there, the teacher assumed the airs of a sage on the stage with the students sitting in rows, showing respect. By contrast, the Western teacher played a role of a facilitator who questioned, encouraged and stimulated her students in their thinking, problem-solving and independent learning.

In terms of choosing teaching materials, it seems that the Chinese teacher was an instructor of the textbook, who regarded it as the sole teaching material in the classroom instruction, while the Western teacher acted as an information provider whose teaching materials were beyond textbooks. They covered various authentic materials ranging from an interview with Jamie Oliver, a model of the code of conduct from "Boeing" to the handout of the tasks for the students. Tomlinson (2001) holds that no textbook can be an ideal choice for any particular class and firmly believes that an effective teacher should be able to produce and provide additional teaching materials over and above textbook material.



The findings concerning the two teachers' roles indicate that the students involved all took an active part in their collaborative work. However, the teachers concerned performed quite different roles in the student group work. In the whole process, the Chinese teacher looked like a bystander, holding fast to her "fortress" and leaving her students alone with their discussion. Conversely, the Western teacher played the role of a director and an involver who gave instructions for the pair work, initiated it, monitored it and organized feedback (Hedge, 2002). Rather than standing on a platform, she strolled across the room, from one group to another, monitoring, guiding and even being involved in their collaborative work. She was also a keen observer. When noticing a pair student at the back row unwilling to start their work, she went up to them, helping them break the ice and guiding them onto the right path.

Charles Curran (cited in Richards, J.C. et al., 2005) developed a method of second and foreign language teaching – Community Language Learning – by which teachers are expected to counsel students learning in small or large groups. These groups are "communities" (Richards et al., 2005). In this sense, if we compare the classroom to an intact learning community, the teacher's role is assumed to be the "counselor" who should help the students with their problems (Richards et al., 2005). From the observation, the Chinese teacher seemed like an educational island (Terry, 2005) that is separate from the outside world (here he refers to the whole learning community). There is a lack of counseling and communicative atmosphere. In the whole session, the Chinese teacher was indulged in her monologue-like instruction, looking ahead without any eye contact with her students. As a consequence, the atmosphere in the classroom appeared to be oppressive and dull.

An interesting finding from the research is that the Western teacher played the role of an educator when explaining the new word "integrity" from the text: "Boeing Code of Conduct". She stated that she had "integrity" as a teacher and believed in sharing knowledge and helping people to learn. She also asked the students what they had "integrity" in. Some students responded with "doing an assignment, and do it well" and so on. At last, she summarized that being a good student was the reflection of their "integrity". The interesting point is that the Western teacher's belief coincides with the mottoes of every Chinese teacher. They are: *jiao shu yu ren* (it is the teachers' duty to not only impart knowledge to their students but also teach them morals) and *yan chuan shen jiao* (teaching by personal examples as well as verbal instructions). Leng (cited in Xiao 2006) holds that personalized approach is believed to be more effective than mere verbal instructions.

Another finding which should be highlighted reveals that the Western teacher acted as a psychologist in her class when monitoring and guiding the students' group work. Being a psychologist, you should be capable of reading your clients' mind: what are they thinking about? And what do they need? When the students started group discussion, the teacher moved all the time, strolling among each group, listening to them attentively and joining in their discussion. When doing so, she usually did a deep-knee bend, looking amiably in the speaker's eyes with an eye contact and smiling with encouragement. The teacher's deep-knee bend proved to be very effective in communicating with her students. In Halliday's SFL theory, the social context of language can be analyzed in three factors: the field of discourse, the tenor of discourse and the mode of discourse (Richards, 2005). In the classroom context, the participants of tenor are teacher and students. Compared with students, a teacher is in a higher position. Interpersonally, there is a social distance between a teacher and students. The Western teacher sensed the importance of setting up a reasonable close relationship with her students (Christie, 2005), so she made an eye contact and deep-knee bend while communicating with her students. As a result, it bridged the gap between the teacher and students, and helped the students remove the teacher's authoritative image from their minds. Looking down at her, the students at this moment saw her as their sister or friend rather than a teacher. Hence, their feeling of tension and timidity in front of her were completely gone. Followed that was their fluent and meaningful argument.

### 3.5. Implications

Some of my Chinese colleagues who teach writing often complain that their students are fed up with the writing course since the lesson always follows the same sequences of teacher's deconstruction of the text → students' imitation → final product. They find it hard to interact with students in class. However, the case study enables us to gain knowledge from the Western teacher's practical teaching approach, her responsibility, the dynamic interaction and the rapport with her students in class. In spite of the fact that the Chinese teacher's teaching style is viewed as a specific subject in the case study, it still reflects some problems existing among the Mainland teachers. Even if the Chinese teacher admitted that her traditional teaching style could no longer cater to the students' learning styles in a modern classroom context, the conception of teacher-fronted, whole-class mode (Davies & Pearse, 2002) influenced by the Chinese culture of teaching has taken root among many Mainland Chinese teachers.

When mentioning the expectation of how teachers should appropriately behave, Hedge (2002) claims that it may require far more than a simple change in pedagogy: a change in self-perception is needed. That is to say, if a teacher desires to transform from the traditional image of an authority figure to a facilitator and helper of the students, he or she, above all, should change their self-conception. Therefore, some suggestions are provided as follows.

- Overseas immersion is a good way to broaden the teachers' minds and adjust their teaching styles.
- Panel activities and in-service training are very helpful for teachers to gain experience and receive professional input.
- Self-reflection enables the teacher to reflect on his or her experience in teaching and bring light to the possible problem areas in teaching and redesigning the class plan. Just as Ye (1998) said, "He who devotes his lifetime to designing teaching plans may not be an expert teacher. However, he can become an excellent instructor if he keeps on self-reflection for three years".
- Most importantly, it is high time ELT Mainland Chinese teachers realized the importance of education and bore in mind that teaching is a profession as well as a vocation. Teachers must shoulder great responsibility to cultivate their students' physical, mental and psychological competence. Moreover, they should love their students and give them individual attention (Hedge, 2000). In classroom teaching, they ought to do their utmost to make the classroom a supportive environment where students can be motivated to participate in various activities, and experience their academic progress. This in turn can facilitate students' self-confidence, self-esteem and positive motivation, enabling them to achieve greater success (Davies & Pearse, 2002). The teacher's dedication to teaching embodies this lofty vocation.

## Conclusion

The research of the case study suggests that there are some striking differences in traditional Chinese and Western teaching styles as reflected by the different teaching approaches, teacher talk time as well as teacher's roles. The findings indicate that the Western teacher pays more attention to cultivating her students' communicative competence and independent learning ability more than her Chinese counterpart does. Moreover, her student-oriented teaching style has proven to be more suited to her students' learning style. The objective of the case study is to provide Main-

land ESL Chinese teachers with insights into the Western teaching style from which they can adjust their own teaching styles so as to improve their professional competence and teach their students more effectively.

Since the data collected and the time spent on the research were limited, the findings might not represent all the Chinese and Western teachers' teaching styles. Therefore, the study cannot generalize its findings. Moreover, the case study still needs further research and some questions should be explored. For example, what are the underlying paradigms influencing the difference between the traditional Chinese and Western teaching styles? How should the Mainland Chinese teachers transfer what they have learned from the Western teaching style into their own classroom teaching?

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