

# Understanding Chinese Names: Cross-Cultural Awareness in the EFL Classroom

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In this article, I examine the EFL teachers' level of cross-cultural awareness in the language classroom in relation to understanding Chinese names. I suggest that increased awareness of the Chinese culture is an essential factor in EFL teaching, enabling teachers to interpret behaviour, identify learning styles, and help students make the transition to a western model of education. Thus, in order to help students cross the linguistic and cultural divide, the ability of teachers to overcome their own underlying prejudices should not be underestimated.

As a result of China's 'open door' policy and a demand for higher education that far outstrips supply, the growing numbers of Chinese students entering tertiary level education in the West has become a social phenomenon. This recent trend has implications for western EFL professionals who are faced with the challenge of teaching students whose cultural background is far removed from their own. While the intricate relationship between foreign language teaching and culture (Bryam 1988, Valdes 1990, Stern 1992), and the need to help FL students understand the context of the target language and "the ways of a people" (Lado, 1957) is generally well accepted, the fundamental differences in cultural behaviour that western teachers experience in teaching Chinese students needs further investigation. This is especially important when neither teacher nor student can derive understanding of the others' behaviour based solely on their own cultural experience. Without such basic cultural knowledge teachers' are ill equipped to interpret puzzling or confusing behaviour and identify students' preferred learning styles. Knowing where students 'are coming from' is essential if the teacher is to help them bridge the linguistic and cultural divide and make the transition to a western model of education.

In this article, I give a personal reflection on one particular source of cultural confusion and misunderstanding: the subject of Chinese names. It is a significant example because of the importance attached to the ways in which we address each other. As a part of linguistics, onomastics, the scientific study of names, recognises the importance of names as phonological, semantic, personal, social and cultural phenomena. An example of their cultural importance is demonstrated by the fact that between members of a shared culture, names are an invaluable source of prior information, which not only confer identity but also reflect a particular culture and ethnicity. As Liu (2001) argues, names are the mirror of society. However, for the EFL teacher, lack of shared cultural knowledge can create confusion and frustration, tensions that act as obstacles to language learning. In teaching Chinese students, therefore, the need for EFL professionals to re-evaluate their level of cross-cultural awareness should not be under-estimated.

## Levels of Cross-cultural Awareness

In his booklet, *An Attainable Global Perspective* (1976), Robert Hanvey describes four levels of cross-cultural awareness (CCA): The first level uses information about the 'other' culture to create superficial stereotypes. The second level is based on an expanded knowledge of the 'other' culture that focuses on its differences, and the subsequent difficulties it presents. The third level accepts the 'other' culture at an intellectual level and uses it as a frame of reference for understanding. Finally, at the fourth level, empathy of the 'other' culture is achieved through direct experience. This model is useful in evaluating EFL teachers' level of CCA in relation to the way that they respond to their Chinese students' names.

### Level 1: Chinese Names as Superficial Stereotypes

Teachers often formulate superficial opinions about Chinese names which show them to be entertaining or bizarre. Many teachers are often feel bemused by the common use of Chinese names such as *Li* or *Yu*. Similar feelings are also had for those students who seem, with ease, to adopt or change their western names.

### Level 2: Chinese Names as Problematic

At this level, teachers encounter Chinese names as problematic. Phonological differences between the English and various Chinese languages make pronunciation difficult. In addition, limited cultural knowledge of Chinese names can also add to the problems; there may be difficulties in identifying the family name from the given name or understanding how or why some students select western names while others do not.

### **Level 3: Chinese Names Are Understood Intellectually**

A growing intellectual awareness means that teachers begin to understand that Chinese names begin with the family name and are followed by the given name. There is also an awareness that the majority ethnic group, the Han Chinese, use approximately only a hundred surnames, which accounts for the common use of certain one-syllable names such as Li, Yu, Wang, Wu, Zhao and Zheng. There may also be an awareness of how given names tend to be historically and culturally influenced. For example, in the 1960's and '70's, the decades of the Cultural Revolution, babies tended to be given patriotic names like *Guoqing* (National Day) and *Hong* (Revolutionary). Those born later in the relative economic stability of the 1980's, tended to be given names that reflected the strengths and qualities that parents wished for their children: *mei* (enchanting), *hua* (flower) and *zhijian* (firm in spirit) and *jinsong* (sturdy pine).

### **Level 4: Chinese Names Are Understood Experientially**

At this level, experience allows teachers to re-evaluate what they know of Chinese names. Underlying this combined intellectual and experiential knowledge is the understanding that the size and scope of the People's Republic of China (PRC), in terms of demography, ethnicity and language, preclude a single cultural identity. However, there are some common experiences that teachers face in understanding their students' names. Firstly, there is awareness by teachers that while it is common in western tertiary education for teachers and students to address each other using given names, the situation couldn't be more different in China. In China the family name followed by the given name is commonly used by the teacher in addressing the student, while the student addresses the teacher simply as 'teacher'. The fact that the given name is reserved for close friends and family members can cause feeling of discomfort for the student when used by the western teacher. Secondly, on the advice of their Chinese teachers, many students select western names in an attempt to ease their transition into western society. As many Chinese students have a relatively limited repertoire of western names, they are influenced by a variety of sources. Using the official translation system of the PRC, Pinyin, some students may choose to make direct translations of their names, for example, *Tao* becomes *Peach*, *Chun* becomes *Spring*. However, the unique nature of given names may make such names sound strange to western ears, and it is not uncommon for students to select names that have a similar phonological equivalent, for example *Mei* becomes *May*, *Wei Wei* becomes *Vivian*, *Lei* or *Li* may become *Lily* etc. Another source of western names is provided by inspirational film stars and *Bruce* and *Arnold* have become fairly common choices of male names. Finally, some students display a more creative and unique way in choosing a western name. One of my own students selected the name 'Philips', as opposed to 'Philip', inspired by that influential symbol of modern culture: the make of his TV set.

At this final level of cross-cultural awareness, EFL professionals have become sensitive to the cultural differences between western and Chinese names and forms of address. Acquired knowledge and experience means they are able to overcome their underlying prejudices and see that while the names Chinese students use, may at first seem amusing, bizarre, confusing or problematic, they are, in fact, the result of rational and logical choices. Some students may wish to use their family name, not yet feeling comfortable with casual forms of address used in western education. In contrast, others may make a concerted effort to adapt to the new culture by using their given name. Other students may feel that a western name is more in keeping with their new culture and select a name that they feel is most appropriate to them and their new environment. Thus, the way teachers respond to their Chinese students' names not only reflects their own level of cross-cultural awareness but it also can help teachers identify students' level of cultural integration. It is this kind of knowledge which is essential in the development of strategies to bridge the cultural divide

## **Bridging the Cultural Divide**

Developing strategies that show sensitivity to Chinese students' needs and experiences, and designing a syllabus that is culturally responsive (Martin 1997), is a subject in its own right. However, the features of western education that we take for granted e.g. small class sizes, verbal expression, integrated language skills and an individualistic approach to learning often conflict strongly with the Chinese model of education. Large classes of 60 and above are not unusual in China. Students who display competent writing, grammar and reading skills may never have had the opportunity of speaking in English before. Furthermore, expressing individual opinions or disagreeing with lecturers and fellow students in debate may cause problems for Chinese students who are more accustomed to a collective approach to teaching and learning.

With an enhanced level of CCA, EFL teachers may wish to question their use of a "communicative" approach to language teaching that reflects western cultural values, preferring, instead, to develop strategies that build upon students' cultural and educational background, e.g. emphasis on collaborative learning rather than individual expression, the design and selection of culturally appropriate materials, the avoidance of materials which are purely culture-based, such as television advertisements, soap operas, or pop idols etc.

## Conclusion

I have used my personal experience of understanding Chinese names as a small but significant example of the many differences that exist between Chinese and western culture. For EFL professionals, overcoming such differences will play an increasingly central role with continued growth in the number of Chinese students in tertiary level education in the west. EFL teachers need to question their perceptions of and practices in teaching EFL to Chinese students. Only by reflecting on their own level of cross-cultural awareness can they hope to design and implement a culturally valid syllabus that will ease the transition of students to a western system of education.

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