

*Observations and Comparative Analysis of English Language  
Instruction in Mexican and Taiwanese Universities and Implications to  
English Language Instruction in the US*

by

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## **Introduction**

I had heard many frustrations over the years, albeit usually from non-ESL instructors, about ESL students behaving, "well, differently" in college classrooms and how it rendered costly to ESL student success. Specific allegations ranged from a lack of participation and interest to poor initiative and creativity. Only after such an indictment would the complainant soften the blow with an obligatory, "diligent" or "respectful". While I might not have entirely agreed with such a synopsis, I would admit that ESL students require a specific pedagogy to accommodate unique learner needs. While one might assume ESL learner needs to strictly encompass language needs, there is a body of literature that suggests home country educational experiences and learned classroom behaviors influence ESL student success in US classrooms, which plainly stated might cause them to appear, "well, different" at times. With this in mind, I searched halfway across the world and deep within my pedagogical soul in pursuit of the following research objectives:

- visit classrooms and meet with students and educators at 5 colleges respectively in Taiwan and Mexico. (These countries represent the home countries of more than half of the ESL student population at Rio Hondo.)

- ascertain specific differences and/or similarities between the ESL pedagogical practices commonly held in these countries and those typical of college classrooms in the US.

- compare my findings with peer reviewed literature relevant to this topic.

- compile an outline of the pedagogical differences and/or similarities along with specific strategies regarding how to respond to any potential disconnect between the pedagogy to which many ESL students are accustomed and the ESL pedagogical protocol in typical US college classrooms.

## Literature Review

Perhaps the most dominant feature of the US educational landscape documented by the literature in recent decades is a shift toward student-centered practices. Chandler (1999) notes this trend while offering the following distinction between student-centered and teacher-centered approaches:

Traditionalists emphasize academic standards in schools that tend to be more authoritarian, following a curriculum that is teacher-centered, content-based, and formed around the traditional core disciplines...Progressives are concerned with using differences in individual learning styles to determine both process and content of learning. They are concerned with developing processes like higher order thinking and less concerned with the transmission of factual knowledge (1999, p.6).

Specifically within the field of ESL education, a focus on learner needs and active learner participation emerged in the Communicative Movement (Krashen 1982; Cummins 1994). More recently, Weinstein (2005) set forth a series of principles for student-centered instruction in an ESL class setting, including building on prior knowledge, striving for authenticity, shared responsibility for the learning process, and community building. Undoubtedly, student-centered practices have become widely and generally accepted as the preferred educational approach in the US and this holds true within the ESL professional community.

In contrast, the research regarding English language instruction in Taiwan reveals a tendency toward traditional, teacher-centered methods. Chu (2003) explains, “the pervasive methods firmly established in Taiwan continue to be traditional rote teaching methods dating back to or even preceding the 1950’s” (p.26). This notion is shared by Huang (2001) who summarizes English language instruction in Taiwan in the following manner. “Although the Ministry of Education has issued new curriculum standards based on the Communicative Teaching Approach, (Taiwanese) teachers are not using this approach and

teacher-centered practices remain dominant” (p. 154). In brief, English language instruction in Taiwan tends to rely primarily on teacher-centered practices, which is in contrast to the student-centered approach that has gained wide acceptance and use among ESL professionals in the United States.

Regrettably, empirical research about specific English language instruction in Mexico was seemingly unavailable in the literature. However, discussions regarding educational policies in Mexico suggests, albeit peripherally, similarity to teaching methods found in the United States. Buenfil (2000) explains how globalization has influenced educational policies in Mexico by bringing these policies to parallel those in other industrialized countries. Lacy (1994) supports this notion with a detailed chronology of UNESCO’s role in Mexico’s educational reforms and attributes Mexico’s susceptibility to external influences to its proximity to the US. Finally, Avila (2005) reflects on the modernization of higher education in Mexico while describing “flexible approaches to education based on student-centered learning” as a core tenet of Mexico’s National Education Plan, 2001-2006. As such, while there is an absence of available literature regarding English language instruction in Mexico, the modernization of Mexico’s system of higher education during the 90’s suggests possible similarity to the US, especially insofar as both countries strive toward a student-centered approach.

Not surprisingly, the literature also suggests that international students studying in the US experience a sharp disconnect between the educational approaches of their respective home countries and educational protocols specific to the higher education in the United States. Pang (2000) claims that foreign students in the US are more inclined toward traditional, teacher-centered educational systems as such systems prevails in the home countries of many foreign students studying in the United States. Stevenson and Stiglar (1992) found that such distinct pedagogical practices accounted for the achievement gap between China and Japan and their lagging US counterpart. Chall (2000) analyzed decades of educational research involving both US and Asian educational systems and also noted dissimilar teaching methods along the student-centered/teacher-centered continuum. Interestingly, while Stevenson

and Stiglar endorsed a student-centered approach, Chall advocated a teacher-centered paradigm. Nonetheless, the literature observes dissimilarity between educational practices in the United States and those commonly found in foreign countries, particularly in Asia.

In brief, the literature suggests student-centered educational practices to be the preferred approach in ESL classrooms within the United States. This is in contrast to the predominantly teacher-centered approach employed in Taiwan as described by the research. The literature suggests a relationship between educational approaches in Mexico and the United States, albeit based primarily on recent educational policy reforms. Finally, studies indicated that foreign students studying in the United States experience a strong disconnect between educational practices in their native countries and those found in US classrooms.

## **Methodology**

In order to initiate the methodological process of this project, I first began by researching prospective colleges and universities in the two target countries, Mexico and Taiwan. After compiling a rough list of potential colleges, I began contacting college representatives from the list, usually English department chairs. Initially I sent a cover letter providing an overview of the study and the specific manner in which prospective institutions would participate. Eventually, I received responses from a number of department chairs indicating their institution's willingness to participate and I was able to construct a working list of 5 Mexican and 5 Taiwanese universities to visit. I then began to coordinate the scheduling and other logistics of my visits with corresponding office support. During August and September of 2006, I conducted the field work for this study in conjunction with the following Mexican universities: Universidad de Guanajuato, Universidad Autónoma de Queretaro, Universidad de las Américas (Puebla), Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara, and Universidad de Baja California (Ensenada). During October and November of 2006, I completed the field work of this project in collaboration with the following Taiwanese universities: National Taiwan University, National Taiwan Normal University, Soochow University, Shih

Chien University, and National Cheng Chi University. All of the colleges involved in this project were selected based on an effort to provide a representative cross-section of the target countries' overall systems of higher education in terms of geography, student composition, and resources. As I conducted these field investigations, I observed several classes at varying levels of instruction with at least two different instructors at each college. By the end of the field work portion of this study, I had observed over 30 classes and upward of 60 hours of instruction. Additionally, I conducted hour long interviews with over 30 student, instructor, and program administrator participants. Upon completion of this process of raw data gathering, I then proceeded to organize and analyze the data with respect to the project objectives. I also conducted a review of relevant literature (section two of this report) to further familiarize myself with the topic and establish a point of comparison for the study's findings. Finally, I prepared and presented the findings of this investigation and their corresponding implications in the respective "results" and "recommendations" sections.

## **Results**

### Class Size

Taiwanese and Mexican English language classes seemed to diverge somewhat in terms of class size. Class size appeared to vary in both countries with respect to course level, as it does in many US ESL programs. Higher level courses in both Taiwan and Mexico tended to be much smaller (often between 12-16 students) than lower level classes were. This is almost certainly attributed to lower enrollment in advanced level courses, which is also the case in the US. In Taiwan though, lower level courses were often held in large lecture halls and enrolled 50 or more students. In contrast, lower level classes in Mexico rarely held more than 30 students, and usually enrolled between 24 and 28 students. This difference in class size appears to coincide with each country's tendency toward distinct class activities, which will be discussed subsequently.

### Physical Classroom Dynamics

As one might expect, based on the differences described in class size, the physical classroom dynamics also differed in English language classes in Taiwan and Mexico. In Taiwan, instruction tended to take place in large rooms or lecture halls with noticeably symmetrical rows of desks facing a stage-like podium, often raised above students' eye level. The rooms were highly modern and equipped with a power point screen, lab top capability, and a dry erase board, usually featured high ceilings, and one or two predominant colors. There were not always windows in the room, which sometimes resulted in a seemingly sterol environment, but thankfully there was always a well functioning air conditioning system to offset the sweltering Taiwanese heat and humidity. If Taiwanese physical classroom environments seemed more institutionalized than creative, they certainly were well-kept, modern and comfortable. In Mexico, the physical classroom layout took a slightly different form with equal adequacy. Classrooms were much smaller, roughly one-third the size of the large Taiwanese lecture halls, and fit 25-30 students comfortably. Although most of these classrooms did contain desks, the rows were structured less rigidly and tended to change form throughout the class session as students moved in and out of group activities, to share materials, or to obtain a more desirable angle. Classrooms in Mexico seemed a bit more lived in than they did in Taiwan, but were equally functional and perhaps more inviting. Most classrooms contained a dry erase board, an overhead projector, a television, and audio equipment could be easily retrieved from a nearby room. These classrooms also featured an impressive aesthetic value with posters, pictures, and other visual artifacts covering the walls and surrounding the room. Most classrooms also had windows, which seemed to open up the room a bit and although the central thermostat systems were not as prevalent as they were in Taiwan, room temperature never seemed to be an issue. In brief, Taiwanese classrooms were large, clean and modern while Mexican class environments were smaller, cozy and inviting, both environments being equally function.

### Delivery of Instruction

Dissimilarities between Taiwanese and Mexican English language education were also apparent with respect to the delivery of instruction. In Taiwan, class instruction portrayed an air of formality. For instance, instructors rarely referred to individual students by name and throughout a class session an instructor might single out a student to answer a particular question, but would simply do so by pointing to a student or looking directly at him or her. During certain class activities, instructors would skim up and down a roster and call on individual students at random by student identification number. In most Taiwanese classes, instructors spoke using a microphone and would often speak many minutes on end without verbal interaction with any particular student. In all fairness, the large-sized classes would make it difficult for instructors to learn all students by name and class size is most likely why microphones were relied upon. In contrast, Mexican instructional delivery seemed more personalized and personable. Most Mexican instructors referred to numerous students by name and there appeared to be close interaction between students and instructors both during and after class, some of which even seemed appropriately social in nature. Undoubtedly, the smaller class sizes facilitated this type of personal and individualized student-instructor rapport. Mexican instructors also tended to reveal more personal information about themselves than Taiwanese instructors did. While several Mexican instructors mentioned their families and home life, most personal information shared by Taiwanese instructors was limited to experiences learning English abroad or other facets about their own educational experiences. Finally, the English register that Taiwanese instructors used tended to be more formal than that of their Mexican counterparts insofar as British English is more formal than the American version. Although many Taiwanese instructors had studied advanced degrees in the US (in fact to a much greater extent than Mexican instructors had) the version of English that Taiwanese instructors spoke was British while Mexican instructors leaned toward American English. In short, perhaps largely due to the bigger class size in Taiwan and smaller class size in Mexico, Taiwanese instructors employed a more formal and

less personalized instructional delivery while Mexican instructors seemed to adopt a more familiar and personal instructional approach.

### Class Activities

Another area that seemed to be influenced by class size and illustrated a contrast between English language education in Taiwan and Mexico involved class activities. Consistent with the trend, Taiwanese activities appeared to be more traditionally structured while Mexican class activities were student-centered and dynamic. Granted, class activities were interactive, discussion based, and student-centered in both Taiwanese and Mexican classes at the higher levels, in which classes averaged between 12-16 students. Nevertheless, most Taiwanese classes were predominately lecture based while the majority of Mexican class activities incorporated a variety of interactive, small group and whole class dynamics. Current and convincing trends in language learning praise classroom practices similar to those described in Mexico and admonish those consistent with Taiwanese classes. Interestingly, though, I found strong and weak areas of each approach used in each respective country. For instance, while many Taiwanese instructors used a lecture based method, some of these lectures were highly creative, well delivered, and inspiring. As expected and often criticized, though, others dragged. Conversely, while many of the Mexican activities generated spirited interaction and language practice, sometimes the activities seemed to begin and end arbitrarily and the approach became overly repetitive at times. Ultimately, each approach seemed viable when executed well and led to student engagement, which will be discussed in a subsequent section of this report. However, it may be fair to claim that the interactive student-centered model found more prevalently in Mexican classes may be more conducive to active learning while a lecture based approach, even when done well, runs the risk of fostering passive learning.

### Student Participation

Along the same lines discussed above regarding passive versus active learning, there was a noticeable difference between student participation in Taiwanese and Mexican English language students. In most Taiwanese classes, students remained primarily quiet throughout the class session. While they did not seem particularly unengaged or inattentive, they simply did not tend to ask questions or eager to answer the many questions posed by the instructor. While some Taiwanese instructors persisted and/or called on individual students to respond, even then most responses seemed short and vague at best. Similarly, there was relatively limited chatter and socialization between Taiwanese students during class. If nothing else, this quietness allowed the instructor to maintain firm class control, but as discussed in a previous section, could lead to passive learning. Conversely, Mexican students tended to be highly vocal and participative during class as well as social and talkative after class. Usually this was conducive to energized language learning activities and active learning, but when noise became excessive it seemed to compromise class control and objectives. Again, student engagement, which could be found in both forms of participation, is perhaps a more useful barometer of effectiveness than the level of participation itself. Nevertheless, active learning is more likely to be found in environments of rich student participation.

### Engagement

Although it has been brushed upon in earlier sections, it is worth expanding on the notion that both Taiwanese and Mexican classes illustrated varying levels of student engagement. Although the instructional and environmental differences between English language learning in these countries have been outlined, they both appeared to achieve (and sometimes miss) levels of student engagement. For instance, as Taiwanese students often packed into large lecture halls and were subjected to lengthy, long-winded lectures for minutes on end, they usually appeared to be paying close attention, taking copious notes, and remaining diligent and dutiful to the lesson at hand. In the same way, even

as Mexican students rushed from one language activity to another tirelessly, they most often completed exercises, asked questions, and remained primarily on task. Obviously, Taiwanese and Mexican instructors who prepared and/or delivered uninteresting lessons, either through a boring lecture or a monotonous flurry of class activities, seemed to dampen student engagement. In these instances, students might begin to stare aimlessly, chatter, or lay their heads down to sneak a quick nap. However, I observed this to result from poor lesson planning or poor instructional delivery rather than consequence of a particular pedagogical approach. Fortunately, the majority of my class observations in both countries showcased effective instruction and responsive and engaged student behavior.

### Course Content

An additional observed similarity between English language learning in Taiwan and Mexico, one that certainly bears implications to student engagement, is course content. During my visits, I intentionally observed a wide cross-section of courses with respect to content, ranging from beginning speaking and listening classes to advanced literature and debate. From these observations, I noticed that both Taiwanese and Mexican students seemed to respond more favorably, in terms of participation and engagement, when course content was relevant to them. I witnessed this in two forms. First, when the content was relevant to an extrinsic goal students seemed more involved in the lesson. For instance, in a bilingual certification preparation class, one that prepared students to take the bilingual certificate proficiency exam in order to earn the corresponding certificate, students appeared highly involved and interested as the instructor offered tips on what oral interviewers consider when making an evaluation. Secondly, apart from extrinsic motivation, I observed that themes relevant to students' experiences rendered higher levels of student involvement and engagement. For example, in a conversation class in which the topic of acceptable dating practices was presented, a theme particularly close at heart among most young adults, students seemed highly interested and present in the lesson. Conversely, dry,

abstract, and irrelevant course content, which I observed more or less with equal rarity in both Taiwanese and Mexican classrooms, seemed to inevitably trigger student displeasure and disengagement. Again, promisingly, course content seemed relevant to student interest and needs throughout the vast majority of my observations in both countries.

## **Recommendations**

### Foster Active Learning Gradually

Although Mexican students appeared to be more responsive to an interactive class than Taiwanese students were in their respective home countries, an ESL instructor in the US will often find both groups take time to warm up to a student-centered class structure. Understandably, taking language risks as an international or immigrant student in essentially a foreign college classroom would seem daunting. As such, it is vital to foster active learning among students gradually. Through my observations, I found that instructors often forced students beyond their comfort level of participation by asking difficult open-ended questions. For instance, an instructor might ask, "What was your impression of the reading?" Such a question would require a great deal of analysis and delineation and might take several minutes to adequately explain. This would seem a tall order for even a highly confident active learner. The more successful instructors that I observed would begin by posing a specific question to an entire group requiring them to choose from a limited number of options. For instance, "Do you think the main character's actions were smart or cowardly?" Without singling out a student, several class members might chime in their own responses. Then with some integrative momentum, the instructor might prod a bit further. "Why was it smart?" or "Why was it cowardly?" If there are no takers on either side the instructor might frame the question differently, "What would you have done in that situation?" If a group discussion still would not unfold naturally then the instructor might shift into a small group dynamic. Essentially, the idea is to be prepared to ease slowly and gradually into an active learning environment.

### Lighten up the Class Environment

Through student interviews I heard students describe finding themselves learning best when the class environment is light-hearted and fun rather than serious and boring. This notion may seem self-evident, but I observed specific behavior among several instructors in both countries that seemed particularly effective in lightening up an English language classroom. To begin with, several instructors seemed to win their students' affection and raise engagement levels through self-deprecating humor. One instructor had the class hanging on his every word as he described his pathetic dating life in college. He recalled asking 25 girls out on dates and being rejected every single time. In his own defense, he lamented, the official count might have been fewer as several of the girls left his presence before he was able to fully extend the invitation. The class erupted in laughter as the instructor delivered the punch line and the positive energy remained several minutes into the next segment of the lesson. I also observed light hearted group presentations that seemed to have served a similar purpose. In another class, several days prior to Taiwan's National Moon Festival, students were given class time to prepare an English language rendition of the legendary origin of the Moon Festival. This required a cast of characters, a rough script, and a great deal of improvisation. As a graded assignment or an individual task, such an activity might be taken too seriously to benefit language learning in the same way. However, as a fun, non-binding performance, almost intended to be done badly, the entire class remained involved and engaged in the lesson. Learning to effectively lighten up a class environment may require trial and error exploration, but when done properly, it seems to play well in an English language course.

### Relevant Course Content

Although the topic of relevant course content was discussed at length in the results section of this report, it is worth reiterating that English language learners tend to become more engaged in a class lesson that is relevant to their extrinsic goals or overall experience. An example of providing relevant course content to

serve an extrinsic goal might include providing sample writing prompts to prepare ESL composition students for an end-of-semester common final examination. The high stakes nature of the exam and the students' extrinsic goal of passing it would motivate them to fully engage this topic. Aside from extrinsic goals, course content that is generally relevant to students' experiences tends to elicit higher levels of student engagement. Topics such as young adulthood, friendship betrayals, and the ups and downs of romantic relationships, seem relevant to student interest. However, these themes might require modification to suit the age diverse composition of California Community College classrooms. For this reason, I also suggest that an instructor provide general themes from which students can select a more interesting topic of their choice. For instance, an instructor might set forth the topic of "dating", which students might narrow down to "on-line dating", "interracial dating", "blind dating", "dating a coworker", "dating your brother's friend", and so forth. In brief, selecting relevant course content, and perhaps doing so by negotiating the selection process with students, tends to serve effectively in English language classrooms.

### Participation and Student Engagement

As previously discussed, Taiwanese and Mexican students seemed to display varying levels of class involvement and participation. In this instance, participation refers to oral interaction with fellow students and the instructor. English language instructors in the US will routinely find that many classes tend to begin a semester with low levels of student participation and hopefully improve throughout the semester. I indicate "hopefully" insofar as class participation is a desirable class characteristic that is evidence of a student-centered classroom, which is generally praised throughout the professional ESL community. However, simply because a student, or class for that matter, is minimally participative, does not necessarily indicate disengagement. Engagement is meant to describe the extent to which a student (or class) is mentally connected to a particular lesson or class activity. Some students, particularly those who are less accustomed to an interactive class environment,

may remain thinking, contemplating, absorbing, internalizing, and/or analyzing as he or she listens to an instructor or another student carrying the class interaction. The quiet student is still benefiting from the experience, and since he or she is mentally in tune with the lesson, engagement is being achieved. Conversely, another quiet student's thoughts may drift into what he or she will have for lunch later. This student is obviously not engaged with the lesson. In brief, while one's student-centered tendencies may lead one to submit that ideally all students should participate freely, it is not safe to assume that simply because a student does not participate in class that he or she is bored or lost. Some students are merely at a place at which they learn best that way.

### Balanced Class Control

In my class observations, I gathered that English language students in Taiwan and in Mexico seemed to benefit more or less equally through diverse educational approaches. This may have been attributed to students' knowing what to expect from their instructors and how to best learn from his or her approach. I observed certain instances, though, during which instructors maintained too much class control (by rambling on excessively during a lecture for instance) and others when instructors relinquished too much control (when overwhelming noise drowned out a language exercise for example). This is not to suggest that an instructor should not employ a variety of pedagogical strategies in an overall educational approach. In fact, I recommend that instructors utilize various instructional dynamics, including lecture, group discussion, pair work, and individual tasks. During these activities, however, it is important not to dominate too much of the action or allow students to take the focus of a lesson too far off course. It may require a certain amount of teaching experience to be able to accurately gauge and maintain this balance, but it is a skill for which to strive.

## Summary

In closing, this glimpse into English language instruction in the home countries of the two largest ESL groups at Rio Hondo College, Mexico and Taiwan, has revealed relevant insight. Overall, instruction in Taiwan seemed more traditional and formal than it did in Mexico, where it appeared relaxed and more student-centered by comparison. The facilities and instructional resources in each country also reflected these corresponding dynamics. Interestingly, each pedagogical approach usually seemed to work effectively within its own context. Nonetheless, this investigation found overarching trends in effective strategies and classroom practices that seemed to enhance the learning process among both countries observed. They include fostering active learning gradually, lightening up the class environment, selecting relevant course content, differentiating between “participation” and “student engagement”, and balancing class control.

Ultimately, by exploring the instructional practices of these programs, and identifying a series of “best practices”, we gain context and understanding of large segments of the population we serve. This is an important step toward the precarious and paramount end goal of student success.

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