CHINESE AND AMERICAN CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION: CONFUCIAN AND CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Classroom instruction in China and in the United States have sharp differences. Typically, constructivist learning theory shapes American classroom instruction whereas Confucian educational culture shapes Chinese classroom instruction. Furthermore, typically, Chinese classrooms adopt a direct instructional approach whereas American classrooms adopt an indirect instructional approach. Awareness of such differences in classroom instruction informs educators of the educational backgrounds of students coming from different educational environments and cultures, enabling educators to better serve different student populations. Additionally, it is worth noting that educational culture worldwide is converging as indicated by world culture theory. This paper presents different classroom instruction in China and the U.S., and inspires educators to learn from the differences, reflect on their own instruction, and eventually innovate and improve their instruction.

Keywords: Confucian perspectives, constructivism, classroom instruction, China

When it comes to American classroom instruction and Chinese classroom instruction, there are a lot of differences. Typically, constructivist learning theory is the framework that shapes American classroom instruction whereas Confucian educational culture is the framework for traditional Chinese classroom instruction. Yet, China has conducted some educational reforms in teaching and instruction recently in certain regions and certain levels of education, which makes contemporary teaching in China a complex phenomenon. Deeply rooted in ancient Chinese educational philosophies and Confucian-heritage-culture, even Chinese contemporary education has incorporated some elements of western teaching to a certain degree; however, the dominant educational system and instruction still vary sharply from typical western education and instruction. In this paper, constructivist learning theory and Confucian educational culture will be presented, direct instructional approaches and indirect instructional approaches will be discussed, educational reforms in China will be displayed, world culture theory will be mentioned, and conclusions and reflections will be included.

Constructivist Learning Theory

It is well-known that the constructivist learning theory makes up the guiding framework in teaching and learning in the United States where classrooms provide a platform for learners to construct meanings as active and participatory learners (Ma & Luke, 2014). On the contrary, traditional Chinese education is established in an environment where teacher guidance and authoritative content are prevalent and mainstream (Ma & Luke, 2014). Therefore, students from the United States are normally accustomed to participatory dialogues in classrooms whereas students in China may not be familiar with classroom discussions and oral presentations (Ma, 2008, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014).

"The social constructivist theory depicts knowledge as socially situated and collectively constructed" (Windschitl, 2002, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014, p. 66). In school settings, all teaching and learning should revolve around learners and provide learners with hands-

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on activities to enable them to actively construct knowledge and meaning on their own rather than passively receive transmitted knowledge from teachers (Ma & Luke, 2014).

However, recent years have brought about educational reforms and changes in China. "Constructivist learning theory becomes the main theoretical basis for reform and innovation education" (Liu et al., 2020, p. 543). For instance, the integration of network technology and English language teaching in China embraces the constructivist learning theory. Constructivist learning theory advocates creating a student-centered learning environment that includes four key elements, which are situation, collaboration, conversation, and meaning construction (Liu et al., 2020). Nowadays, multimedia and the Internet provide us abundant learning materials that are similar but more interesting than traditional paper versions of textbooks and such online resources situate learners with rich background knowledge. The relationships among students have changed from competition to collaboration under the constructivist learning theory via conversation among learners and between teacher and learners. And learners explore to construct their own meanings to achieve their learning goals.

Ancient Chinese Education Philosophies

Ancient Chinese education philosophies are summarized as: "emphasizing the cumulative process of learning and the importance of basic knowledge, emphasizing the integration of learning and practices, highlighting "practice makes perfect", and stressing heuristic instruction" (Shao et al., 2012, p. 56).

Such educational philosophies are rooted in Confucianism, which influenced traditional Chinese teaching considerably. The Chinese ancient teaching heavily relies on recitation and memorization following the sequence of "lecturing, listening, memorizing, and practicing" (Lei, 2005, as cited in Shao et al., 2012, p. 73). The ancient Chinese teaching process starts with the teacher reading and explaining; then, students repeatedly reviewing and reciting; and then, students asking and checking answers in teacher lectures and textbooks (Shao et al., 2012).

Confucian-Heritage-Culture

Students from mainland China grow up in a culture influenced hugely by Confucian ideals, which values harmony, collectivism, education, "filial piety", and family traditions and authority (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Sun, 2013, as cited in Sun et al., 2019). Filial piety basically requires people to obey and respect parents and take care of them when they are old (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). Generally, Chinese parenting styles are more controlling and authoritarian than western parenting styles which are more tolerant and less demanding (Thakkar, 2011). Confucian-heritage-culture values diligence, self-efforts, willpower, hard work, and doing one's best on learning and lifelong practice (Sun et al., 2019). Confucius emphasized personal efforts and hard work instead of innate ability in terms of learning success (Thakkar, 2011). China's educators are regarded as respected authorities and teaching in China is characterized as apprenticeship, transmission, teacher-centered, text-limited, highly-structured, exam-oriented, and didactic (Holmes, 2005; Sun, 2013, as cited in Sun et al., 2019).

Traditional Classrooms Influenced by Confucianism

Influenced by Confucian educational culture, traditional Chinese classrooms normally have big class sizes, and have transmission of information as the single instructional method (Yi et al., 2021). In other words, there are few teacher-student interactions in traditional Chinese classrooms and the teacher is not able to take care of each student, make correct judgements on student learning, or provide timely feedback to students. Thus, students' learning creativity is difficult to accomplish (Yi et al., 2021). Teachers teach, disabuse, and propagate ideology and so-called legitimate knowledge (Shao et al., 2012). They are knowledge authorities and sages (Shao et al., 2012). "On Teachers" by Han Yu (802 A.D.) summarized three roles of a teacher: "to spread truth, to impart knowledge, and to untangle students' puzzlement and confusion" (Ma & Luke, 2014, p. 66). "Reciprocally, the student's roles are also threefold: to be exposed to truth, to learn knowledge, and to solve their puzzlement and confusion" (Ma, 2008, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014, p. 66). As a response to the imposed roles, teachers in Confucian culture are expected to be the content experts who prepare the content comprehensively before the class, lecture the content systematically during the class, and answer students' questions and misunderstandings after the class (Ma & Luke, 2014). In a similar vein, students are expected to preview the text before the class, to attentively listen to the lecture but normally without interrupting or questioning the teacher during the class, and to ask questions after the class (Ma & Luke, 2014). Typically, a traditional Chinese class is characterized as a lecture according to predictable and pre-determined contents, processes, examples, exercises, and homework, with occasional, if not zero questionings (Shao et al., 2012). Students mentally engage the content internally but do not externalize the content in many expressive forms such as hands-on projects or in-class discussions or debates (Ma & Luke, 2014). Class sizes in K-12 education are typically 50-80 students per class whereas in college level are typically 40-200 students per class. Counterintuitively, some students from Confucian-heritage-culture, who were trained in environments that are large class-sized, teacher-centered, lecture-based, exam-oriented, and memorization-stressed, turn out to be able to outperform their U.S. counterparts who come from a learner-centered and constructivist learning background (Watkins & Biggs, 1996, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014).

Direct Instructional Approach

The traditional Chinese model of teaching embraces the direct instructional approach, which builds on the idea that a highly structured presentation of knowledge enables the maximum learning for students (Ma & Luke, 2014; Shao et al., 2012). Specifically, first, the teacher presents a concept; second, the teacher shows the examples or illustrations to examine if the concept stands; and third, the teacher directs students to practice the concept until concept mastery is reached, during which students receive feedback from the teacher, apply the concept, and find examples of the concept (Ma & Luke, 2014).

Deeply rooted in Confucian culture, traditional Chinese teaching adopts a knowledge transmission method and views students as empty vessels waiting to be filled by information transmitted by the teacher (Ma & Luke, 2014). The teacher is considered as a content expert and authority figure that students normally do not question or challenge

(Ma & Luke, 2014). Chinese teachers have three expected roles: a role model to conduct socially preferred behaviors for their students, the role of parents or mentors, and the role of a teacher to ensure the desired progression of every student (Hu, 2002, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014). All these roles put the teacher in the directive seat in deciding what to teach and how to teach. Thus, they maintain complete control over the class at all times to guarantee the smooth transmission of planned content (Tang & Absalom, 1998, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014). The transmission of knowledge in the traditional Chinese direct instructional approach relies on imitation and repetition to help students achieve mastery of content (Tang & Absalom, 1998, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014). The instruction is highly regulated and structured, strictly following the national curriculum for each grade level (Ma & Luke, 2014).

The method of transmission of knowledge aligns with the Chinese value of the importance of the solid and comprehensive foundational knowledge that students establish and accumulate a knowledge base before they apply or create (Ma & Luke, 2014). Thus, the focus of learning is not on how knowledge is constructed or created but on how the authoritative knowledge is transmitted to and internalized by students in the most effective and efficient way (Ma & Luke, 2014).

Indirect Instructional Approach

Strikingly different from the direct instructional approach is the indirect instructional approach that builds on a constructivist framework, which believes that knowledge is constructed by the learner rather than transmitted to the learner (Ma & Luke, 2014). The indirect instructional approach cultivates learners in becoming self-learners (Ma & Luke, 2014). Instructors use cases to help students infer a general principle or a concept and learners search for patterns, come up with questions, or make generalizations. The role of the instructor is not the authoritative figure as in the direct instructional approach; instead, the instructor serves as the facilitator who provides a context for students to make generalizations appropriately. Three features characterize indirect instructional approaches. First, it is students' own responsibility to learn instead of teachers; second, learning occurs when new information is connected to previous knowing and believing; and third, active learning achieved via discussions and collaborative learning in groups are ways for students to solve problems (Prince & Felder, 2006, as cited in Ma & Luke, 2014). However, an indirect instructional approach sometimes invokes interpersonal conflicts in teamwork and sometimes more resistance from students than a direct instructional approach (Ma & Luke, 2014).

Reforms of Classrooms in China

Traditional instruction caused some problems in China. For instance, traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in China have such problems as strict teacher-student relationships which lead to less in-class discussions (Lu, 2014, as cited in Zhou, 2020) and lack of opportunities to cultivate critical thinking (Zhang et al., 2015, as cited in Zhou, 2020). Specifically, the instructional design and procedure in a traditional Chinese EFL class starts with the teacher previewing the topic in the textbook; then explaining the new words, sentences, and grammar; requesting students do exercises individually or in groups; evaluating students' performance; and finally providing

feedback and comments (Liu et al., 2020). In response to such problems, China has conducted educational reforms in recent years. The College English Curriculum Requirements in 2007 released by the Ministry of Education (MOE) of China proposed new blended teaching models that are both computer-based and classroom-based (MOE, 2007, as cited in Zhou, 2020). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) helped remold the traditional teacher-centered learning model through a new pedagogy called the "flipped classroom," which is an ICT-supported hybrid learning model that reverses the traditional in-class and out-of-class components of learning (Jenkins et al., 2017, as cited in Zhou, 2020). The "flipped classroom" pedagogy adopts the teaching methods that are task-based, case-based, inquiry-based, and project-based (MOE, 2015, as cited in Zhou, 2020). Specifically, three stages complete the flipped classroom teaching model, which are lecture videos as the core for previewing before class; task-driven and inquiry-based interactions in class; and diversified comments and reflections after class (Xie & Xu, 2015, as cited in Zhou, 2020). There are many positive effects of flipped classrooms. For instance, it offers out-of-classroom assignments that are more engaging and less awkward (Qiang et al., 2015, as cited in Zhou, 2020). It also broadens the borders of a classroom (Chen & He, 2015, as cited in Zhou, 2020). It enables students to explore different forms of assignments, such as recording an oral response to a video, collaboratively writing an essay online, and cooperating with group members to create a video (Zhang et al., 2015, as cited in Zhou, 2020). However, such a flipped classroom is not without problems; some students complain that they have insufficient out-of-classroom time, lack technology skills, and lack the access to online resources (Webb & Doman, 2016, as cited in Zhou, 2020). It is worth noting that students especially point out that they feel unaccustomed to learner-centered instruction (Yu, 2015, as cited in Zhou, 2020). Similarly, instructors also complain of some challenges they face when practicing a flipped classroom, such as instructional design problems, technology problems, and ICT implementation (Zhang, 2017, as cited in Zhou, 2020). Another reform happened in college English classrooms in one university in China. The instruction changed from the traditional teacher-spoon-feed-student instruction to student-self-instruction to cultivate autonomous learners (Wang, 2012).

More reforms have been made in college English classrooms in China. To address the criticism that English-major education in China is deficient in cultivating real-life use of English language, critical thinking, and problem-solving, instructors in Chinese college English classes became change agents. They tried different classroom instruction from the traditional one that students experienced in high schools, which is teacher-governed instruction (Ruan & Toom, 2020). For instance, one instructor who received education in the UK adopted student-centered instruction. The students initially resisted and were unadjusted to this new style of instruction as they were accustomed to teacher-centered instruction. However, after the initial resistance and adjustment, this instructor later effectively facilitated the transformation of students into active participants in classes (Ruan & Toom, 2020). Another instructor used innovative instruction to adapt a famous Korean TV show, *Running Man,* as a classroom activity in English academic writing class and achieved success in developing students' problem solving and analyzing skills and collaborative learning (Ruan & Toom, 2020).

Some medical universities in China implemented English-medium instruction (EMI) (Jiang et al., 2019). The instructor uses English in the visual demonstration, oral presentation, and class interactions with the objective of cultivating students' academic English communication and content knowledge and expertise (Jiang et al., 2019). The form of instruction is still a traditional Chinese style that starts from teacher lecture and occasional questioning and interactions (Jiang et al., 2019). And interactions are rarely between teacher and a single individual student, and even with one student, it will often lead to teacher and whole class interaction (Jiang et al., 2019). However, the double objectives of English and content knowledge learning of such EMI models have never fully been realized in real practice. The instructors are incompetent in English teaching and students rely on PowerPoint slides reading more than listening to comprehend the content (Jiang et al., 2019).

World Culture Theory

Despite cultural differences in America and China, it is worth noting the world culture theory that indicates a cultural convergence because of globalization in the current age in which we live. Specifically, world culture theory is a grand sociological theory that states that with globalization, modern states are becoming more and more convergent and similar (Anderson-Levitt, 2003: Frkovich, 2015). This does not necessarily translate into all educational systems and schooling in different countries being reformed and unified to be lasting and permanent systems; yet it does suggest that educational systems in China and the United States may be becoming more alike (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Frkovich, 2015).

Conclusion

In summary, classroom instruction in China and in the U.S. have a lot of differences ranging from frameworks that guide instruction to instructional approaches in classrooms. Educational reforms in China have made classroom instruction in China nowadays a complex issue to study. As educators, it is valuable for us to be aware of these instructional differences to be able to serve different student populations; to see what is different from our own styles; to further reflect on our own styles; and finally, to improve and innovate our classroom instruction. It is due to this exposure to differences that we can start to see what we did not see before. To put it in a metaphor, fish only realize that they are in the water until they see the land. Learning our differences enables us to learn the familiar better. That is the meaning of this paper.

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