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Disagreeing with Your Professor: Exploring Chinese and American Graduate Students' Intercultural Pragmatic Strategies

Chencen Cai
The Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

Miriam Eisenstein Ebsworth
Department of Teaching and Learning, New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York, USA

Timothy John Ebsworth
Department of Bilingual Education, TESOL, and World Languages, Kean University, New Jersey, USA

ABSTRACT

As American universities become increasingly diverse, students often encounter cross-cultural challenges. Chinese students represent a substantial international U.S. student community, with distinctive pragmatic norms and values. This study investigates Chinese international and American graduate students' intercultural pragmatic strategies towards a face-threatening critical incident: expressing disagreement to a professor. Our mixed-methods design revealed quantitative and qualitative differences in participants' strategies and judgments of alternatives, demonstrating distinctive underlying norms and values. Many American participants preferred to express different opinions in class, while Chinese students privileged more indirect options, though each group included participants with alternate preferences. Implications for cross-cultural communication and pedagogy are offered.

Keywords: intercultural awareness and competence; intercultural pragmatics; cross-cultural communication; critical incidents

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011), international students are defined as "students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education" (p. 297). In the 2022/23 academic year, there were 289,526 Chinese international students studying in American higher education institutions, ranking as the largest international student community (27.4%) in the United States (Institution of International Education, 2023). While these learners enrich university culture, they present challenges in their pragmatic strategies as they interact with American instructors and peers. Singh and Jack (2022) note the importance of language and culture in mediating the success of Chinese transnational learners. Indeed, the distinctive sociolinguistic conventions and cultural values of each group can result in pragmatic failure (Yusifova, 2018) in that the messages individuals are trying to send and receive may be misunderstood. From a critical perspective, the communicative domain of intercultural pragmatics can serve to integrate or marginalize international university students (Kokkonen & Natri, 2022). To promote more successful communication, it is important to comprehend learners' pragmatic systems and those of others with whom they interact (Abelmann & Kang, 2014). As highlighted by Howe et al. (2019), the relational dimension of teacher-student communication is crucial to their success and full engagement in learning.

Our research explores the English-language communication of Chinese international students (CIS) with their instructors and peers in a U.S. university. Here we report on responses to a critical incident (CI), a sensitive intercultural situation whose appropriate resolution is viewed as problematic (Snow, 2015). One CI nominated by the learners involved a possible challenge to a professor, a potentially face-threatening situation. This CI was chosen because it is central to the acquisition of knowledge within a diverse community. Our study took place at Urban University (pseudonym), a college with a high percentage of Chinese students. Participants were international pre- and in-service teachers from China and their American peers. All were studying second language (L2) pedagogy.

Chinese students in the United States are often successful academically (Li, 2017). Yet, they face a range of cultural and pragmatic challenges in their interactions with native English speakers. Using a mixed-methods design, we utilized an intercultural pragmatics research approach to deconstruct the choices of participants through an investigation of how they might confront a potentially face-threatening situation in which the strategy and language chosen by the student is socially sensitive.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for our study is drawn from intercultural pragmatics. Since meanings are expressed through language use in social contexts, linguistic and sociocultural factors are central in shaping communicative competence (Fant & Lundell, 2019). Intercultural pragmatics relates to how functional meaning is transmitted and understood within particular social contexts (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). This component of communicative competence is required for successful language use so that messages can be accurately transmitted and understood.

When interlocutors unintentionally violate expected norms, they may be perceived as impolite although their expression would be considered appropriate in their speech community (Kecskes, 2017). Variables influencing speakers' pragmatic choices include social distance, relative power levels, and obligations involved in performing particular speech acts (Yang, 2019). Here we focus on a situation that involves university students and professors whose pragmatic choices incorporate norms relevant to that setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We explore the socio-pragmatic aspect of student willingness to contest an idea a professor has offered in class and the strategies Chinese students studying in the United States might employ in this sensitive situation. We recognize that participants' choices represent complex intersections including "the learner's L1 pragmatics, a partial understanding of the target language pragmatics, and the particular restrictions and resources of the institutional setting" (Davies & Tyler, 2005, p. 136).

Directness and Pragmatic Strategies

Students may express their intentions through direct or indirect speech acts. While relative directness in speech acts can sometimes be viewed as a continuum (Félix-Brasdefer, 2022), we operationally define directness in disagreement here as a speech act or speech act set performed by a student that sends a message that they are disagreeing with the professor's statement. Indirect strategies are relatively more ambiguous and less potentially face-threatening.

Cultural Values and Classroom Experiences

The kaleidoscope of languages, varieties, and subcultures in U.S. society involve complex communicative systems (O'Keeffe et al., 2019), and the resulting pragmatic contrasts can be amplified when interlocutors engage in sensitive or face-threatening acts. Pragmatic conventions often reflect cultural values. Goddard and Ye (2015) discuss conflicting Anglo-English and Chinese values such as personal autonomy versus harmony. Yang (2019) describes that the Chinese construct of politeness includes "respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement" (para. 15). Chinese students' pragmatic norms for expressing these values, particularly regarding those of higher status, often diverge from those of their American peers and professors. As Giora and Haugh (2019) indicate, behavior may vary depending on the perceived power relationships between communicators which can be mediated by culture.

English Proficiency

Heng (2018) explored Chinese students' experiences in a U.S. college. The appropriate use of English was a major obstacle for them; they felt unprepared to communicate in authentic U.S. settings. Hao's longitudinal study (2018) of

Chinese undergraduates at an American university identified difficulties including language, differences between educational systems, and constructing social relationships. A recent phenomenological study conducted in the UK confirmed the importance of English proficiency and social relationships in CIS' transnational experiences in college (Zhang et al., 2024). In fact, Zhang et al. (2024) reported that even more fluent Chinese students feel constrained by their lack of experience with English colloquial speech.

Class Participation

Researchers have also addressed CIS' apparently passive behavior in class (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011). Zheng (2010) studied CIS participation in an American university and found that students perceived themselves as silent learners who demonstrated active non-verbal participation, including listening and responsive movements. In a cross-cultural setting, Girardelli and Patel (2016) surveyed Chinese university students from a China-U.S. collaborative university regarding class participation. Results demonstrated that attitudes, norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-efficacy jointly influence participation. Girardelli et al. (2020) further identified a discrepancy between Chinese students' perceived classroom participation and Americans' expectations. Chinese students believed that attentive listening would be an important part of participation. They also viewed participation could enhance their English proficiency, yet found it to be a frustrating activity that could be time-consuming and cause potential anxiety.

Expressing Disagreement

Since disagreeing politely, particularly to someone of higher status and power, is potentially face-threatening, this delicate negotiation can be problematic. Nevertheless, Khammari (2021) reported that for American students, it can be appropriate to express disagreement to speakers of higher or equal status, with fine-tuned context-based adjustments. For Chinese L2 English speakers, their strategies often rely on indirect approaches to show disagreement, avoiding face threats (Zhu & Wang, 2022).

Liang and Han (2005) compared disagreement strategies between Mandarin Chinese and American English speakers with a discourse completion task. When disagreeing with a higher-status speaker, Chinese students implemented more politeness strategies than Americans. For peers, both groups employed more politeness strategies as social distance increased. Yan (2016) also surveyed disagreement strategies of undergraduate Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) and native English-speaking American students. Chinese students used politeness strategies sensitive to variation in perceived social power while Americans privileged positive politeness, irrespective of social power.

Comparing native Chinese speakers, native English speakers, and EFL speakers with high and low proficiency expressing disagreement, Chen (2006) found native English speakers employed more direct and creative verbal

expressions while Chinese speakers demonstrated more harmony-oriented strategies.

These studies indicate a need for further research to explore Chinese international students' intercultural pragmatic strategies as they interact with English-speaking peers in the context of expressing disagreement. Variables identified include alternative pragmatic norms, cultural values, educational experiences, and performance through English L2. Students' experiences can provide valuable insights for applying effective pedagogical practices to help enhance their cross-cultural communication skills.

METHODOLOGY

In the current study, we compare the pragmatic strategies of Chinese international students (CIS) and U.S. students (USS) as they encounter a challenge to disagree with an instructor's presentation of facts in class. (This is part of a larger study which implements a range of CIs aiming at investigating students' intercultural pragmatic strategies in a university setting.) Our mixed-methods approach allowed us to interpret quantitative responses by eliciting rich data from a subset of questionnaire respondents.

Research Questions

(1) How do selected Chinese international students (CIS) and U.S. students (USS) evaluate alternative pragmatic responses to a critical incident involving a challenge to a professor?
(2) What differences are identified between CIS and USS participants regarding their evaluation of alternative responses?
(3) What explanations are offered by participants to explain CIS and USS preferences?

Participants

Ninety-two participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011). We chose graduate students majoring in second/foreign language education at Urban University in the United States and selected from among volunteers who responded to a recruitment flyer, to reflect the demographic distribution of language education graduate CIS and USS at the university. Our sample included 46 Chinese participants (primarily middle class), 37 females and 9 males: average age 23 (range 21-29). All spoke Standard Mandarin as their first or second language (with an alternative Chinese variety as L1). Their English proficiency ranged from intermediate high to superior with the majority at the advanced level (ACTFL, 2012). Twelve participants had learned other foreign languages. In addition, there were 46 American native English speakers, 40 females and 6 males: average age 30.3 (range 22-55). Thirty Americans had some fluency in one or more foreign languages. One had studied Mandarin. American-born Chinese participants were excluded from the study because their

backgrounds and experiences might be inconsistently influenced by the American context and might reflect different perspectives compared to Chinese participants.

Researcher Positionality

The first author is polylingual in Mandarin Chinese, Guilin dialect, Cantonese, and English. A lecturer in applied linguistics, her research interests include second language education and cross-cultural communication. The second author is an English-dominant native Yiddish speaker with Hebrew and Spanish heritage languages. She has studied French and is currently studying Mandarin. Her experience ranges from teaching language learners in elementary schools to educating pre- and in-service language teachers in a university. The third author, a Welsh native, is bilingual in English and Spanish with a working knowledge of French. A professor in Language Education, he currently resides in the United States and has also lived in England and Puerto Rico. He has extensive experience as a college ESL teacher, teacher educator and researcher.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Adapted from the design of Eisenstein Ebsworth and Ebsworth (2000), as noted above, we utilized a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018):

(1) We identified potential critical incidents for the Chinese international students through natural observation and interviews.
(2) We developed a questionnaire listing a subset of the critical incidents with alternative responses to the incidents based on observation and initial interviews. Responses considered typical of one or both communities were chosen.
(3) The questionnaire was administered online to the participants who responded to the alternative solutions to the incident on a series of semantic differential scales. (Adjectives were derived from all steps above and the literature.) Quantitative responses were analyzed through descriptive statistics and the Mann Whitney U-test (See tables 1-4 below).
(4) Follow-up individual in-person interviews with a subset of 20 interviewees from questionnaire respondents (10 from each group) explored underlying norms and values as interviewees explored their reasons for the choices they made. This interview data was analyzed recursively using a constructivist grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 2014) to identify themes.
(5) Data interpretation was triangulated through discussions with a bicultural expert and member checking.

Data came from participant judgments of responses to the critical incident, disagreement with an American professor. This CI offers a common dilemma confronted by university students.

Participants responded to four alternative solutions on 23 seven-point semantic differential scales.1=most negative and 7=most positive.

The following CI was presented:

In a classroom discussion, the professor talks about some issues from a critical perspective (e.g. the education system). Most of your classmates seem to agree with the professor's opinion[1], but you think that the professor is mistaken. You are aware of facts that contradict the ideas he/she has expressed.

Alternative responses presented in random order were:

(1) **Waiting until after class**: Feeling uncomfortable, I decide not to state my opinion in class. I stay silent and share my understanding with the professor after class. At the end of class, I would go up to the professor and say quietly, "Excuse me, professor, do you have a moment? I have some ideas about XXX (the issue) I'd like to share." I either continue the conversation or make an appointment to talk to the professor later.

(2) **Expressing disagreement in class**: Feeling confident, I speak about my concerns and directly share my opinion with the professor and classmates based on my knowledge. I think it is important to present information to the group when it is relevant. I raise my hand, and when I'm called on, I say, "I can appreciate what you are saying, but there is another way to look at this." Then I explain my point of view with the facts it is based on.

(3) **Not raising the issue**: Feeling anxious, I decide not to raise my minority opinion with my teacher or fellow students. I let it go and don't pursue the matter.

(4) **Writing an email to the professor**: In order to avoid confronting the professor face-to-face with contradictory information, I send an email after class very politely bringing the additional facts to the professor's attention. I write, "Dear Professor XXX (name), I was very interested in your comment about XXX (the issue) in class today. I came across some additional information I think you might find relevant. Please see the article attached." I will let the professor draw his/her own conclusions.

Data were considered from a cross-cultural perspective that reflected the way participants from each group understood and interpreted their language and socio-pragmatic strategies. Quantitative data was elicited through English, the language used in most classes and between CIS and USS peers.

Semi-structured post-hoc interviews (Seidman, 2006) provided interpretation and exploration of the data. Based on the previous study (Eisenstein Ebsworth & Ebsworth, 2000) and the research literature (Mason, 2010), 20 interviewees (10 per group) were considered potentially sufficient for saturation. All interviews were conducted by the first author in the language(s) most comfortable for the

[1] This hypothetical situation came from the first stage of our study, in which students shared a critical incident. Their perception that the majority of the class seemed to agree with the professor reflected their understanding.

interviewee (Mandarin, English or both) to promote comfort and clarity of communication. The interviews were transcribed and the Chinese sections (about 45% of all interviews) were translated to English by the first author.

Interview themes were identified through a recursive review of transcripts via the Dedoose platform. We used qualitative coding to separate, sort, and synthesize data representing participants' reflections about the four options and possible adjustments in different contexts. We applied a constant comparison approach (Turner, 2022) to identify the themes through sorting focused codes from multiple rounds and levels of analysis:

(1) Segments from each interview were entered into the Dedoose platform and coded for multiple thematic possibilities.
(2) We aggregated related themes into more comprehensive categories. A list of broader themes was reviewed and refined recursively in order to capture overarching thematic ideas that emerged from our data.
(3) The coding process was triangulated through review by three participants from each community, the three authors, and a bilingual/bicultural expert.
(4) Follow-up discussions with participants also confirmed that all data reflected an assumption that the CI occurred in a U.S. context with an American professor.

Data triangulation was conducted with member checking and a bilingual bicultural expert to check the accuracy of how interview interactions were interpreted along with details from the qualitative analysis.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Viewing our semantic differential data as ordinal (Laerd Statistics, 2024a), our sample satisfies the assumptions of the Mann-Whitney U test[2] for comparing group judgments of the 4 alternative responses to the CI.

Four scales were eliminated: unmasculine/masculine, unfeminine/feminine, unassertive/assertive and usual/unusual as participants from both groups tended to interpret the constructs differently.

Since several of the scales were significantly correlated for most responses (Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient from .213 -- .789; $p < .05$), we present six of the scales in the following quantitative analysis (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2015), namely:

- Bad/good (correlated with ineffective/effective; negative/positive; unintelligent/intelligent)
- Discourteous/courteous (correlated with inappropriate/appropriate; disrespectful/respectful)

[2] The Mann-Whitney U test was applied considering the following dimensions: an ordinal dependent variable, two independent groups of the independent variable, no relationship between the observations in each group between the two groups, and two variables that are not normally distributed (Laerd Statistics, 2024b).

- Immature/mature (correlated with non-aggressive/aggressive; uncontrolled/controlled)
- Inconsiderate/considerate (correlated with uncooperative/cooperative; unfriendly/friendly)
- Indirect/direct (correlated with passive/active; submissive/non-submissive)
- Offensive/inoffensive (correlated with face-threatening/not face-threatening; unsympathetic/sympathetic)

Below are the descriptive statistics followed by Mann-Whitney U test results for each response.

Table 1: Response 1 Waiting until After Class

Descriptive Statistics	Chinese			American			Total		
Scales	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*
bad--good	46	5.63	1.25	46	5.26	1.45	92	5.45	1.36
discourteous--courteous	46	6.11	0.97	46	5.80	1.24	92	5.96	1.12
immature--mature	46	5.48	1.13	46	5.26	1.68	92	5.37	1.43
inconsiderate--considerate	46	6.04	0.82	46	5.52	1.38	92	5.78	1.16
indirect--direct*	46	**3.04**	1.67	46	**4.57**	1.87	92	3.80	1.92
offensive--inoffensive*	46	**3.83**	2.38	46	**5.28**	1.79	92	4.55	2.22

Note: In each response table, the scale with a statistically significant Mann-Whitney U test result is marked with "*."

Regarding *Waiting until after class*, two between-group differences were significant: directness (U=582.0, p< .001) and offensiveness (U=691.5, p= .004). While CIS thought this was a slightly indirect option, USS found it to be slightly direct. Chinese participant judgments of this choice were close to neutral to offensiveness, but American participants found this option inoffensive. For other scales where differences were not statistically significant, both groups rated this strategy as quite good, courteous, mature, and considerate.

Table 2: Response 2 Expressing Disagreement in Class

Descriptive Statistics	Chinese			American			Total		
Scales	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*
bad--good	46	5.39	1.42	46	5.89	1.32	92	5.64	1.39
discourteous--courteous*	46	**5.00**	1.56	46	**5.80**	1.31	92	5.40	1.49

immature--mature*	46	**5.04**	1.37	46	**6.15**	1.25	92	5.60	1.42
inconsiderate--considerate*	46	**4.98**	1.47	46	**5.70**	1.47	92	5.34	1.51
indirect--direct	46	6.15	1.05	46	6.50	0.78	92	6.33	0.93
offensive--inoffensive*	46	**3.76**	1.85	46	**4.80**	1.71	92	4.28	1.85

Regarding Expressing disagreement in class, we found four between-group differences: courteousness (U=736.5, p= .010), maturity (U=551.0, p< .001), considerateness (U=742.5, p= .011), and offensiveness (U=715.5, p= .007). While both groups rated this option positively on courteousness, maturity, and considerateness, USS perceived it to be significantly more courteous, mature, and considerate than did CIS. Chinese students rated this close to neutral in offensiveness, while Americans found it somewhat inoffensive. Both groups found it quite good and direct.

Table 3: Response 3 Not Raising the Issue

Descriptive Statistics	Chinese			American			Total		
Scales	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*
bad--good*	46	**2.13**	1.07	46	**2.87**	1.26	92	2.50	1.22
discourteous--courteous	46	4.87	1.71	46	4.74	1.47	92	4.80	1.59
immature--mature*	46	**2.43**	1.39	46	**3.46**	1.60	92	2.95	1.58
inconsiderate--considerate*	46	**3.67**	1.67	46	**4.57**	1.66	92	4.12	1.72
indirect--direct	46	1.41	0.86	46	1.72	1.24	92	1.57	1.07
offensive--inoffensive*	46	**4.02**	2.53	46	**5.37**	1.82	92	4.70	2.30

Regarding Not raising the issue, four between-group differences were identified: goodness (U=701.5, p= .004), maturity (U=683.0, p= .003), considerateness (U=761.0, p= .016), and offensiveness (U=736.0, p= .009). Although both groups rated this option negatively on goodness and maturity, CIS found it significantly worse and immature. Chinese participants perceived this strategy to be slightly inconsiderate; USS thought this was slightly considerate. The Chinese students were neutral towards offensiveness, but Americans perceived this strategy to be somewhat inoffensive. Both groups were neutral regarding courteousness and found this choice very indirect.

Table 4: Response 4 Writing an Email to the Professor

Descriptive Statistics	Chinese			American			Total		
Scales	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*	N	*M*	*SD*
bad--good*	46	**5.74**	1.18	46	**4.78**	1.63	92	5.26	1.50
discourteous--courteous*	46	**6.15**	1.17	46	**5.41**	1.51	92	5.78	1.40
immature—mature	46	5.76	1.18	46	5.22	1.63	92	5.49	1.44
inconsiderate--considerate*	46	**6.20**	1.07	46	**5.17**	1.42	92	5.68	1.35
indirect--direct	46	4.15	1.94	46	4.28	1.86	92	4.22	1.89
offensive--inoffensive*	46	**3.89**	2.38	46	**4.91**	1.80	92	4.40	2.16

Regarding Writing an email to the professor, we found four between-group differences, namely goodness (U=682.0, p= .003), courteousness (U=741.0, p= .009), considerateness (U=585.5, p< .001), and offensiveness (U=798.0, p= .039). While both groups rated this option positively on goodness, courteousness, and considerateness, CIS perceived it to be significantly better, more courteous, and considerate. The Chinese participants thought this strategy was neutral in offensiveness, but USS found it somewhat inoffensive. Both groups found this strategy somewhat mature and were neutral towards directness.

We note that on the bad/good evaluation, the two groups rated the four strategies from most positive to most negative as follows:

American Preferences	**Chinese Preferences**
l. Express in-class disagreement	**l. Write an email to prof.**
2. Wait until after class	2. Wait until after class
3. Write an email to prof.	**3. Express in-class disagreement**
4. Not raise the issue	4. Not raise the issue

Thus, the favorite American choice, *Express in-class disagreement*, ranked third for the Chinese. The favorite Chinese choice, *Write an email to the professor*, ranked third for Americans. Both groups rated *Not raise the issue* as least preferred. The interview data below highlights the expressed norms and values of participants that contributed to these preferences.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Based on recursive analysis and data triangulation, below are the major interview themes for the two groups, elaborated in the discussion section (Names are pseudonyms).

American Participants' Reflections

Most American interviewees believed that it would be important for students to share different opinions in class because their perspectives and contribution should be respected in an educational context.

Opinions Are Valued

The majority of American interviewees (7 of 10) believed dissenting opinions are valued in class. Nancy explained, "I think at least in this region critical thinking and debate is common and expected." Joanne affirmed, "I think professors look for this. They would see this as a sign of strength…"

Contribution to Class

Eight USS interviewees believed it is important for every student to contribute in class. Elyse advocated, "It's not fair for you, your professor or your classmates, if you don't bring in other opinions."

Classroom Environment

Four USS participants thought classes should emphasize active engagement. Adina shared, "In a lot of American schooling, you're praised for more participation." Sam concurred. "An ideal classroom for me would be one in which every student feels comfortable enough to share."

Cultural Norms and Personality

Three USS identified the influence of personality types. Cheryl mentioned that as an introvert, "I'm very quiet in class, so raising my hand or talking in front of the class… might get a little awkward."

Influence of Classroom Context

Eight USS believed that they would react differently depending on the class population or professor's style. Nancy said, "If I feel like in a class where it's mostly international students, I probably wouldn't interject with the second option (expressing disagreement) ... just to be respectful."

Chinese Participants' Reflections

Consistent with quantitative findings, most Chinese participants reflected that they would prefer more indirect strategies to share different opinions. Many of them emphasized the authority and status of teachers.

Indirect Strategies

The majority of Chinese participants (8 of 10) preferred using more indirect strategies like *Writing an email to the professor* or *Waiting until after class*. Jing shared, "I would not directly point out the professor's mistake at that moment. Instead, I would tell him after class or email him."

Teacher's Authority

In a typical Chinese context, part of showing respect to teachers is not to challenge them; they are assumed to be knowledgeable in the relevant area. Hua offered, "If the students have received education in China, they may respect the teacher and will not challenge the teacher's authority."

Saving Face vs. Accuracy

Four CIS mentioned that Chinese students would not challenge the professor because that would be considered face-threatening. Wenshan said, "[Students] do not point out the professor's mistake directly, maybe because they are concerned that the professor may lose face." Hua commented, "For these students, saving face may be more important than finding the true answer."

Respecting Class Time

Three Chinese participants were concerned that their questions might affect class time and pace. Zhixiang shared, "If my question is just based on my misunderstanding, [raising the question] may affect others' time and the pace of the class."

Confidence Level

Five Chinese participants mentioned that they were not confident enough to share or even imply their dissenting opinions in class. Xiaolu explained, "If my opinion is different from all other classmates' opinions, I might be afraid that my answer is not correct. I will feel less confident to talk about it in class."

Three commented that having to negotiate sensitive situations through English L2 would add to the stress of making a critical comment to a teacher. Yaxin tried to avoid the direct strategy, "While my professor can understand my oral English, other classmates may not."

Staying Silent

Six CIS did not respond positively to *Not raising the issue* because they thought that learners should not stay silent. Suling expressed, "It is not OK to completely stay silent." Moran suggested, "I think you still need to ask the question. If you don't like asking questions in a straightforward way, you may ask this question in other ways."

Some participants admitted that in reality, many Chinese students might actually choose *Not raising the issue*. Hua shared, "I think many Chinese students may let it go and not speak."

Minority Voices

In both groups, there were minority opinions that differed from majority perspectives regarding the alternative strategies to address the CI. Two CIS claimed they preferred direct strategies in this context. Moran explained, "If I were the only international student [in class], I would prioritize the second strategy [express disagreement in class] ... and then we would have a discussion together."

In contrast, two USS said that they would avoid direct confrontations. Tova explained, "I think because... part of it's just fear straight up. I don't like confrontations where the ramifications are less in my control." Stephanie commented, "A lot of Americans... probably feel less free to express their true opinions… if they felt their [other students'] opinions were against them."

DISCUSSION

Participants from the two communities often differed regarding how to respond to the mistaken professor. In interviews, CIS readily accepted the possibility that a teacher may be wrong yet expressed concern that challenging the teachers' accuracy would be perceived as discourteous. Nevertheless, as noted above, the Chinese participants clarified that their judgments here were referent to an American educational setting. Their strategies in a Chinese context would need to be determined independently.

One option presenting a clear disparity between USS and CIS was *Expressing disagreement in class*. American students preferred this option. In fact, USS perceived the in-class response as an expected and natural reaction, echoing the local norms of student/teacher roles in education (Takahashi, 2019). Some American students explained that they felt a responsibility not only to the professor, but also to the community of learning (de Vries & Malinen, 2020) to raise the issue in class.

However, CIS expressed mixed feelings about this option, ranking it as their third choice. Although the quantitative data showed the Chinese respondents found this option to be positive and mature, they were also conflicted. Provocatively, several CIS commented that in reality Chinese students would be unlikely to actually do this even though they were aware that it was relatively more acceptable in the United States. Interviews demonstrated that students' personalities were relevant in considering this choice (Rumyantseva, 2012). A minority of USS revealed that challenging a professor in class would make them uncomfortable, and they would be unlikely to do this, while two Chinese students with outgoing personalities indicated a willingness to raise the issue in class. One expressed feeling responsible to the community of learning, similar to some Americans.

The primary quantitative preference expressed by CIS was *Writing an email to the professor*, the third choice for the Americans. Chinese students found communicating this sensitive issue via email to be more considerate, and less offensive than other options. Of course, it is possible that an email could be worded in a direct way. Nevertheless, the interview data indicated the email option was viewed as consistent with choosing an indirect approach. In addition, some Chinese students mentioned that they would not want to disrupt the pace of the class and so might choose an alternative.

For the response *Waiting until after class*, both groups ranked it as their 2nd preference despite the fact that in both quantitative and qualitative sections some Chinese students found this choice slightly offensive. Several Chinese students also mentioned that waiting until after class allowed them to show consideration by not interfering with the professor's plan. Nevertheless, Chinese students expressed mixed feelings, perceiving a one-on-one after-class discussion as a delicate conversation.

Surprisingly, both groups rated the option of *Not raising the issue* negatively. In fact, CIS rated this alternative as more negative and immature than did USS. The quantitative data revealed some Chinese participants' views that in an American context, students are required to find a way to share their alternative knowledge with the professor. However, as noted, some Chinese participants mentioned that their negative rating of this choice reflected what they think *should* be done rather than what they might actually do.

Another dimension mentioned in the interviews was international students' lack of confidence in their ability to negotiate the CI in English. Additional factors that might influence their hesitation could relate to their relative positionality in the classroom vis a vis native or non-native proficiency (Morita, 2012), and its effect on their willingness to communicate (Henry et al., 2021). Zhang et al. (2024) reported that even more fluent Chinese students feel constrained by their lack of experience with colloquial speech in English.

Limitations

All Chinese participants were bilingual in English and Mandarin. Therefore, the degree to which the views of monolingual Chinese speakers are consistent with those expressed here requires independent exploration. Additionally, since participants are graduate students majoring in language education, and many have knowledge of a second language, we can't extrapolate to the perspectives of individuals from other professions or communities. Finally, since respondents assumed that the CI occurred in an American context, Chinese participants may well report different responses to the same incident in a Chinese setting.

CONCLUSION

Chinese and American graduate students' reflections on pragmatic strategies for responding to a professor's mistaken opinion revealed intercultural pragmatic differences. The general lack of willingness on the part of CIS to express

dissonant ideas in the American classroom may put them at odds with the engagement expected by teachers and peers. Our data show, however, that CIS are willing to participate and even to disagree, but for the most part only in indirect or non-confrontational ways. This makes class organization a crucial choice on the part of educators. Creating small groups in which students are able to explore their questions and even disagreements with what a professor has said is particularly important so that all students have a safe space in which to do so. The role of teacher as cultural mentor has been identified as a critical factor that contributes to transforming the perspectives of students studying abroad to be more open to other cultural views through classroom engagement (Chiocca, 2021). Also, teachers who help prepare international students need to address how to disagree respectfully in terms of culturally appropriate strategies and semantic formulas.

Our data also reveal the importance of developing critical awareness about the sociocultural values and pragmatic conventions in different sociocultural communities regarding teacher/student roles and interactions. An important aspect of language teacher professional education is to prepare teachers to develop effective strategies in working with intercultural populations and expose them to tools that will help them to encourage viewing interactions from the others' perspective (Astley, 2024). This requires the exploration of culture-based norms and constraints, insights that will provide building blocks for mutual understanding (Heng, 2018). Conduct within classroom settings and teacher/student roles and expectations are governed by pragmatic conventions which should be brought to the awareness of professionals and their students. This is an essential component of culturally responsive teaching (Yeh et al., 2022).

In addition, even the highly proficient international students studying to be language teachers from which our population was drawn have areas of discomfort associated with expected student/teaching roles in the U.S. educational context. While quantitative judgments showed contrasts between groups, in some cases, interview data revealed that some strategies participants approved of in theory might be difficult for them to enact in real classrooms. It would thus be helpful for educators to create scaffolding so that international university students can become more comfortable with local expectations and roles. Critical incidents are not only an effective way to gain intercultural pragmatic insights; they can play a useful instructional role in activities raising intercultural awareness. Indeed, a student-oriented pedagogical approach involving critical incidents can facilitate learners' reflections on their intercultural experiences (Xu et al., 2022).

Furthermore, taking advantage of the affordances of technology-based cross-cultural education provides students opportunities to raise multicultural awareness. Commandera et al. (2015) suggest that cross-cultural online connections between Chinese and American students can help shape new knowledge and perspectives regarding their different cultures. Further study implementing such online resources can provide Chinese and American students an opportunity to explain their pragmatic strategies to their peers and to learn from each other about cultural differences. By integrating these resources, teachers and

curriculum developers can help raise participating students' consciousness about cross-cultural understanding (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

In light of the within-group variation present in our data, it is important in future research to explore individual experiences in greater detail, incorporating variables such as their age, family background, language proficiency, length of stay in the country, purpose for study, professional aspiration, and gender orientation. Additional variables to consider include the nature of the class content which may influence students' freedom to ask questions (Pavlik, 2012). Additionally, other variables such as the professor's age, preparation, personality, and general demeanor can influence students' choices (Ibad, 2018). The results of the current study reveal minority voices from both Chinese and American communities. Thus, future research must consider the interaction of personality preferences and educational role expectations. The studies on willingness to communicate (Fatima et al., 2020) and language anxiety (Lou & Noels, 2020) provide potentially useful theoretical frameworks for such exploration.

Longitudinal investigation of international students as their perceptions and attitudes evolve over time are an additional direction to research. The distinction identified by some participants between their sense of what they ought to do in an American classroom setting as opposed to what they might actually do might constitute an intermediate stage of awareness. In addition, the influence of gender on outcomes should be explored and the unique insights of American-born Chinese students should also be addressed in future research.

With the goal of facilitating intercultural communication, we hope that the insights gained from this study can motivate researchers and practitioners to continue investigating students' intercultural pragmatic strategies in challenging situations. Through effective research and informed practice, we can enhance the evolution of education, friendship and trust between different sociocultural communities.

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Author bios

CHENCEN CAI, PhD, is a Lecturer from the Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China. She earned her TESOL PhD from New York University. Winner of the NABE Dissertation Award in 2021, her publications include research on second language acquisition, language variation, and cross-cultural communication. Email: caichencen@gmail.com

MIRIAM EISENSTEIN EBSWORTH, PhD, is Academic Director of the ISEP English program for families of International Students at New York University and is Associate Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning. She received her PhD in linguistics from the CUNY Graduate Center. A contributor to the *Actionthroughwords* website of the UN Language Programme, she has received the 2024 AERA Bilingual Education Research Sig Lifetime Award and has published widely in language and technology, intercultural pragmatics, and bilingualism. Email: mee1@nyu.edu

TIMOTHY JOHN EBSWORTH, PhD, is an Adjunct Professor of Second Language Education at Kean University and former chair of the Master's programs in Multilingual Multicultural Education at the College of New Rochelle. He received his PhD in TESOL at New York University. He was Vice President of New York State TESOL. His publications focus on intercultural communication, attitudes of second language teachers and learners, and L2 writing. Email: ebswortht@gmail.com