

# Bridging Cultural Differences



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# in College Selection and Application

## Incorporating College Selection into a Language Curriculum for Chinese Students

*by Zou Weicheng*

Between 2001-2002, the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania hosted a seven-month, pre-college program to train a group of Chinese high school graduates, who were seeking opportunities in higher education in the United States. The framework of the curriculum was built around comprehensive language training, especially in preparation for the TOEFL and SAT tests, college academic life and American culture in general.

At the beginning of the program, a project was designed to teach students to select and apply to an American college. The project combined acquiring cultural knowledge with learning a language. The main component of this 10-hour project was a series of Chinese student interviews with a group of American college students, who had been through the process of college selection, application and admission. The students learned to critique their existing knowledge of American college culture and to make decisions based on the critical analyses of factors involved in college selection and application. Students also had an opportunity to experience authentic, spontaneous and conversational English. At the end of the project, all students began the college selection and application processes. By the end of the pre-college program, all respective universities where students applied accepted them.

### Student Background

In the last 20 years, more and more Chinese high school graduates have applied to American colleges. They want to study in this country because the Chinese higher education system can not meet the needs of China's huge population. Some 1.3 billion people live in China, but only about 1,022 regular colleges exist across the country (MOE, Ministry of Education, China, 2002). The admission rate in the state system of higher education is about one out of every 13 high school graduates. The competition is incredibly difficult (Fung-Surya, 2001). In addition, China has implemented policies in the last two decades to encourage its citizens to travel abroad to learn new concepts, ideas, advanced science, and technologies they can apply to modernize China.

Success in the country's economic reform has enabled many Chinese families to send their children abroad for higher education. By the end of 1998, the number of self-supporting Chinese students studying abroad had surpassed 150,000, with 47,000 studying in the United States. That number is increasing and the Chinese market still has significant room for growth (Fung-Surya 2001).

Due to different historical and cultural backgrounds, China and the United States are very different in their approaches to college admission. Not many Chinese students, nor their families, have any idea of how to select a suitable college to meet their needs. They rely on their own cultural knowledge when selecting a college in the United States. Not surprisingly, many students suffer unnecessary losses of time, money and other resources before realizing their original choice was not appropriate.

The students attending the University of Pennsylvania program ranged in age from 17 to 24. Most of them came from families of business or governmental officials. They lived better lives than most children in China. These students studied English for more than 10 years, but their knowledge and skills in English were basically limited to written media. Their abilities to read, write, speak, and listen in English were not balanced, with listening cited as the weakest skill.



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Most of these students were average in terms of academic achievement in high school. They were accustomed to learning from books and from teachers' lectures in classes. Their lifestyle was also very simple: school and home.

These students knew vaguely about American college culture, mainly from personal accounts published by Chinese students, who studied in the United States in recent years and became "successful" in America's mainstream society, published. Those authors were perceived as role models and students wished to pursue the same degree of success.

#### **Needs Assessment**

The students' strong motivation to study in the United States correlated with their strong need to understand American higher education culture and to improve their English through experiencing authentic and conversational American English.

First, students needed to understand college culture in the United States. Chinese higher education is very elite in nature. The standard procedures for students who want to go to college start with applications to five or six colleges. Then, students take a series of competitive national matriculation examinations. When the results of the examinations are released, universities and colleges start recruiting according to guidelines about passing scores established by the Chinese government, with slight adjustments for different regions.



If students' scores happen to fall in the guideline range for a particular university, students are lucky and will be admitted. If their scores do not meet the guidelines, they will lose the chance to pursue higher education, possibly forever, unless they are willing to accept offers from other colleges with vacancies. Given such a large student population and so few openings in Chinese higher education, only on rare occasions do students get a second chance.

Obviously, the key to admission is high test scores on the matriculation examinations. Talking about personal needs, interests and aspirations when one selects a college (unless one is a publicly recognized genius, who universities compete to recruit) is a luxury. Naturally, when Chinese students want to select a college in the United States, this examination mentality plays a significant role. Students tend to focus all of their attention on the major tests, such as TOEFL, SAT and other standardized procedures and overlook other important factors.

Second, students needed to improve their communicative ability in English, particularly in listening comprehension. Students knew very well that their first challenge for studying in the United States would be to understand native conversation. Almost all of their English teachers had been local residents, who varied in terms of English proficiency and teaching methodology. Many of the students had never talked to a native speaker of English. A large number of students even assumed implicitly that native speakers always spoke in complete sentences, organized information in good order and were always meaningful when they spoke. To better prepare them for study in the United States, it was necessary to expose them to an interactive language environment. Students also strongly felt the need to learn real, conversational and spontaneous English.



### Theoretical Rationale

This project was designed based on the following principles and assumptions of learning cultural knowledge and developing language ability.

1. Language learning often involves learning how to view two different cultures. An ideal project should encourage learners to make efforts to understand both cultures and to help them remove cultural misconceptions and biases. Learners should be guided to look at both cultures more critically. This principle is derived from Schumann's theory of acculturation (Stern, 1997). For this reason, the project was designed to encourage students to review their own beliefs and the new culture objectively. Then Schumann's theory expected them to reach new understandings that would serve as building blocks for their college selection.
2. Language learning is more effective if the learner is involved in using his or her thinking skills (van Naerssen and Brennan, 1995). An objective analysis of two different cultures also involves the use of thinking skills at both concrete and abstract levels. This project listed the most important factors in college selection for students to consider. The purpose of this project was not to teach about those factors, but to provide students with tools for making critical decisions. Throughout the project, students were involved in interpreting their beliefs, explaining their significance, arriving at new understandings, and comparing and evaluating their assumptions.

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3. Comprehensible output is beneficial for triggering a learner's focus on formal features (Ellis, 1994). In a communicative environment, a learner may concurrently pay attention to both meanings and forms of language if the activity or task is properly targeted. To induce learners to pay attention to the form of language, we utilized Swain's findings about the role of comprehensible output. The activities in this project were designed to encourage learners to produce certain meaningful results from their communication. For instance, the course required students to tape the interaction with American students and produce summaries based on these recordings. In writing the summary report, students needed to revisit the tape recordings and were encouraged to seek help from teachers or other native speakers. These activities led them to notice formal features, particularly those that had prevented them from previous comprehension and communication.



### Belief Statements

The project started with belief statements. The beginning stage drew on students' existing knowledge about American culture to help them prepare language for ensuing interviews. With teachers' help, the students produced a list of belief statements based on group discussions. Typical examples, in the students' own words, include:

1. "We should go to famous universities like Harvard or Yale if we want to study in the U.S. If you go to a small university, people in China will think you haven't got a good education in America because they have never heard of it."
2. "When I select a major, I want to choose the most popular one. You will have a bright future if your major is popular."
3. "It is very important to have a TOEFL score as high as possible, preferably over 610. This is the only thing on which they judge you."
4. "Compared with the TOEFL and SAT scores, admission essays are not as important. How do the admission people tell who wrote them?"
5. "American students are very independent in finance. They paid for their education by working part time while studying. I think we can do that, too."
6. "If I study in an American university, my English will grow so fast that I will soon be like English native speakers in listening, speaking, reading, and writing."
7. "If I study in a U.S. college, I will try to live with American students. That will help me improve my English quickly."

The following four concerns emerged from these discussions.

1. Students were concerned about the reputation of a university.
2. Students tended to choose a program according to its popularity rather than their own interests or abilities.
3. Students were concerned with financial aid.
4. Students tended to believe their English would be as good as a native speaker's after living and studying in the United States for some time.

The first two concerns are related to students' old cultural knowledge. The third issue is a new concern since Chinese students do not need to consider financial support when they apply to a university in China. Both the third and fourth issues, related to financial aid and the English language, reflect students' practical considerations of going to college in the United States.



**To an American, it is natural to consider these factors when selecting a college. The Chinese students had considerable difficulty making sense of these many new concepts. For example, students showed a strong suspicion about writing essays at home and turning them in with the application packet. Their first response was, “How will those college people know who wrote them?”**

While the above are legitimate concerns, many other issues affect students, such as life and career development. Chinese students never consider the development process and helping them extend their horizons is a necessary first step in their American education.

Having developed a long list of belief statements, 10 factors were introduced to the students to consider during the college selection and application process. The factors, representing a general framework for the decision-making process, were developed through reading various college brochures and Web sites and through discussions with academic representatives in American universities. The factors follow:

1. Types of colleges and universities in the United States
2. Programs and majors
3. Personal interests and aspirations
4. Financial aid and tuition for international students
5. Admission requirements for TOEFL, SAT I Math, essays
6. Locations of colleges and universities
7. Student life, including entertainment, sports facilities, clubs, etc.
8. Influence of family, friends, relatives, etc.
9. Faculty-student relationship
10. College and community relationship

To an American, it is natural to consider these factors when selecting a college. The Chinese students had considerable difficulty making sense of these many new concepts. For example, students showed a strong suspicion about writing essays at home and turning them in with the application packet. Their first response was, “How will those college people know who wrote them?” They insisted, even in the class discussion, test scores were more important than essays. Some students even tried to get others to write for them so they could spend more time preparing for the TOEFL and SAT tests.





### Investigation and Critique

To help the Chinese students understand the new culture, we suggested they investigate American college students. We hoped speaking with American students would help them acquire the tools to critique their belief statements and reevaluate their college selection decisions. Additionally, students would gain experience with native speakers in an authentically communicative context.

The students were excited at the idea of the investigation. To begin, a research question was asked based on the class discussion: “How does an American student select his or her college?” A series of interview questions was then developed. The questions, related to the previously identified factors, included:

#### I. Types of colleges and universities

- Q1: What types of college are there in the U.S.? Where can I get this information?
- Q2: What are the main characteristics of each type of college?

#### II. Programs or majors

- Q1: How do you know if the program you are interested in is strong?
- Q2: Is it important to choose a program with a world famous professor?

#### III. Personal interests and aspirations

- Q1: Are your personal interests helpful when you select a major or a college?
- Q2: Do you select your major according to its popularity or according to your interest? Why?

#### IV. Scholarships and tuition

- Q1: Do American colleges give scholarships based on examination scores?
- Q2: If students work while studying, how much money can they make? What kind of work do they often do?

#### V. Admission requirements

- Q1: Besides SAT and TOEFL scores, what else would a college look into when we apply?
- Q2: Why does a college want an applicant to write essays? Are essays as important as the test scores?

#### VI. Locations of colleges and universities

- Q1: What are the advantages of studying in a college in a small town/big city?
- Q2: How do you decide on the location of a college?



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Armed with interview questions, the Chinese students set out to find American students on campus to interview. They were required to record the interview conversations and write a summary report about their findings. When writing the report, students could seek help from their teachers, native speakers or their classmates.

## VII Student life

Q1: What do students usually do when they are not studying?

Q2: Do American students like to live and play with foreign or Chinese students?

## VIII Influence of family, friends and relatives

Q1: Do your parents/friends influence your choice?

Q2: What would you do if your parents did not agree with your choice?

## IX Faculty-student relationship

Q1: How do you consider the faculty-student relationship?

Q2: Is small class teaching always better than large class teaching?

## X College-community relationship

Q1: Why should you consider college-community relationship?

Q2: What is the advantage for the student if the college is closely related to its community?

These questions represented students' concerns about selecting a suitable college in the United States. The students became actively involved in the interview process because they realized the outcome of the research was relevant to their future plans.

Armed with interview questions, the Chinese students set out to find American students on campus to interview. They were required to record the interview conversations and write a summary report about their findings. When writing the report, students could seek help from their teachers, native speakers or their classmates.

Most students were not able to cover all of the questions in their first interview attempt because of the language problem. Either the question was not properly asked or they could not follow the conversation when the interviewee responded elaborately.



Students were encouraged to make several attempts until they were satisfied with their findings. Many students creatively revised the interview questions by raising more general questions, such as “How many factors (did) you consider when you select(ed) a college?” Some students even pursued fairly extensive conversations following the interview. Students listened to their recordings again and again to summarize the main ideas.

The student-written summaries demonstrated their gradual change in perspective regarding choosing and applying to a university in the United States. For instance, before the interview, almost all students doubted the importance of writing essays for application. However, the following interview transcript shows how one student was influenced about essay writing.

#### Interview I

**Student:** Did you write an essay? Important?

**Interviewee:** Yes. They (colleges) get a lot of applications and ... distinguished ones. A lot of people have similar high school grades, SATs, I think. The essay helps a lot.

**Student:** How did you write about yourself?

**Interviewee:** I think they give you choice... mixture ... personalities...

#### Interview II

**Student:** Do you think essays are important in applications?

**Interviewee:** Yes. I answered questions in essays. Sometimes it gives a person a general sense of your sincerity about coming to the institution.

These discussions and others helped the students understand the importance of writing essays as part of the college application. In the remaining months of the program, one student drafted each of her essays seven or eight times to present her own unique personality. One of the Ivy League universities finally accepted her.

Based on the reports and interview findings, students began to discuss their own belief statements in a new light. They gradually realized each of their belief statements involved a set of advantages and disadvantages. While each choice may have brought desired benefits, the choice could also contain potential disadvantages to be aware of when choosing a college. For example, some students realized choosing a program with world famous professors might not always be beneficial. These professors may not be your mentors and they may not give you what you really need for your academic development. Worst of all, they may not be good at teaching undergraduates.



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hey kept seeking, learning and expanding both cultural knowledge and language. They gradually became experienced in the college selection and application process. At the end of the program, the chosen universities accepted all students.

Some students realized it might be good to choose an Ivy League university, while others considered a teaching university as a better choice, if students prefer to study with more teacher support and guidance.

By critiquing their own belief statements, students adjusted to the realities of the U.S. higher education system. Many students revised their expectations when selecting a college. For example, one student was thinking of choosing an Ivy League university at the beginning of the program, but later changed her mind when she found that she really liked a small, cozy and caring environment. She finally decided to apply to a small college with a strong tradition of educating women.

### Conclusion

Critiques of existing cultural beliefs have greatly extended students' horizons and broadened their understanding of a new culture. The new tool enabled students to view potential colleges more critically. They even continued their investigations with parents, admission staff members and teachers after the project was officially completed. They kept seeking, learning and expanding both cultural knowledge and language. They gradually became experienced in the college selection and application process. At the end of the program, the chosen universities accepted all students. More importantly, in completing their first course in American culture, students became savvy applicants in selecting schools according to their own needs.

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