



Culture and EAP: bridging the gap

During the spring of 2024, I carried out a study consisting of 529 instructors and 109 students of English for academic purposes (EAP) at 28 transnational higher education programmes in China to inquire into their challenges, coping strategies and suggestions for teachers in order to create professional development (PD) sessions for lecturers (Bradford, 2025a:285–304; Bradford 2025b:305–328). Difficulties related to cultural differences between the students and those of their teachers (and/or that of their institutions which often adopt a Western style of education) along with linguistic dissimilarities between English and Chinese were found to be a significant source of challenges. Therefore, I developed and conducted a workshop with EAP lecturers within my institution, as well as others,

about culture and its impact on EAP. This paper discusses the PD session's stages, discussion prompts, activities and materials.

As for the session's goals, there are two main ones. The first is to improve participants' understanding of cultural (and linguistic) differences at play in Sino-foreign (transnational institutions in China) EAP classes. The second objective is to heighten attendees' confidence in helping students adjust to the culture of Sino-foreign EAP. The session features 10 stages and is meant to last an hour (Figure 1), but can be altered to be longer or shorter.

Introduction / outline (1 minute)

The session starts with me welcoming attendees along with introducing th

Mitchell R. Bradford

describes how he turned research into professional development.

topic and myself before sharing the workshop's agenda.

Mixer / icebreaker (4 minutes)

A mixer or icebreaker follows the introduction. I refer to the one I use here as a 'language puzzle'. It tests participants' problem-solving skills with unfamiliar languages. See *Resources Online* at https://pavilionelt.com/wp-content/uploads/MET34.5_OnlineResources_IceBreaker_Mixer_Bradford2.pdf

Instructions:

1. Everyone will get a piece of paper with a word (or words) on it which is one of four colours: green, blue, yellow or red. (Appendix A). Each of the colours is a different language.
2. Find everyone that has the same colour as you and sit down together. This is your group for this session.

3. Work with the people in your group to arrange the words you have into a sentence. The sentence, in English, is: 'We're making a sandwich with cheese'.

If I know the participants, I will try to give them a language which they are unfamiliar with to make it equally challenging for everyone. Usually, some attendees are able to identify the first word in the sentence (given away by it being the sole word starting with a capital letter) as well as the last word (which is followed by a period). Additionally, some can guess via the length of the words such as articles and some prepositions (*a* and *with*, respectively in this case) tending to be shorter than the other words. Furthermore, *sandwich* is a cognate in many languages. Likewise, many

languages have a similar structure (noun-verb-object). In this case, the basic structure will be: *we-make / (are making)-a-sandwich-with-cheese*. However, some words will change for different reasons, such as *we* and *to be* forming *estamos* in Spanish.

Once everyone is finished (or after a certain amount of time), we check answers. I ask them if it was easy or challenging to which most people say it was rather difficult. I explain that this is how some of our students feel at times in our classes. Some students want to give up as soon as they encounter an unknown word, even if they know some of the surrounding ones.

I then ask the teachers how they were able to solve the language puzzle and what helped. Usually, they highlight knowing the word with the capital will start the sentence, the one with a period will end it, sandwich being somewhere in the middle, and the rest being a bit of a guess (maybe it being down to two choices). I tell teachers that this is something we should try with our students, showing them that though they may not know every word, and if they try (like the teachers did in this task), they may be able to complete the task and figure out what the sentence or word means.

Group discussion 1 (4 minutes)

In the next stage, I ask the participants to discuss questions related to culture in their groups. This can be adjusted depending on where the attendees are from. Some questions I tend to pose are:

- What is culture?
- What is your homeland's culture like?
- Does your home have more than one culture? Explain.
- What are some differences between the culture(s) of your students and your own?

After the groups discuss for a minute or two, I ask the groups to shout out their ideas which I write on the board. Usually, responses include aspects such as food, dress, holidays, festivals and religion. I discuss the concepts of surface

culture (such as the aspects mentioned) which tend to be easier to notice in comparison with deep culture. In this realm lie features such as attitudes towards others (elders, children, the opposite gender, authority), notions of aspects (beauty, a good student / child / parent) and communication styles (including nonverbal). It is this deeper section, which is more difficult to understand and navigate, which will be the focus of this workshop.

Group task (7 minutes)

The next section tasks participants to consider some of the East Meets West infographics created by Yang Liu (Liu, 2007). These pictures showcase differences between Eastern and Western cultures (German and Chinese to be specific) as interpreted by the artist.

I usually give a little background about the artist and her creations. Yang Liu was born in China and moved to Germany as a teenager. She studied art and became a designer. After experiencing the two cultures, she created several infographics showcasing how they approach and view various aspects of life differently. For this workshop, we will examine three of them. I do the first as an example for the following group task. The image in Figure 2 is displayed on the board or PPT. I tell participants that the blue represents Western culture while the red stands for those in the East (though this is a rough generalisation). It depicts how people in the West and East view themselves.

Typically, people in the West tend to think very highly of themselves. I am big, I am strong, one person can change the world. This can make them seem overconfident and cocky at times. In contrast, those in the East tend to be more modest and perhaps even unsure of themselves. This impacts our classes as we are teaching a Western-style education (with, at times, mostly, if not completely, Western teachers) in China. Therefore, many EAP teachers (especially those from the West) may be accustomed to students being more vocal about sharing their ideas and opinions in class. This can lead to some confusion while teaching in China as the students are much more reluctant to speak.

Workshop stages (60 minutes)

Introduction / outline – 1 minute

Mixer / icebreaker – 4 minutes
Language puzzle

Group discussion 1–4 minutes
What is culture?

Group task – 7 minutes
East meets West

Narrowing the topic – 1 minute

- Chinese high school
- Reluctance to speak
- L1 / C1 interference

Group discussion 2–12 minutes

- What is high school in China like?
- Why are some Ss reluctant to speak?
- Mistakes due to L1 (and cultural) interference?

Walk, read, chat – 12 minutes
Quotes from students:

- How high school in China is different from EAP
- Reluctance to speak
- English mistakes

Group task – 4 minutes
Examining a vocabulary choice issue due to L1

Group discussion 3–10 minutes
Suggestions to help with the issues discussed?

Final thoughts and Q&A – 5 minutes

Figure 1: Workshop stages (60 minutes)

Even if they know the answers, or think they know it, they will often prefer to remain silent. If they have a good idea or do something great, they will often downplay it or not mention it to others.

Having shown an example, I now tell the participants that they will work in their groups to discuss and plan a short presentation about an East meets West infographic.

Instructions

- Each group gets an 'East Meets West' picture
 - A and C will have the same one (Figure 3); B and D will have the same (Figure 4)
- Discuss with your group:
 - what you believe it represents; and
 - how it may impact our EAP classes.
- Each group will need to make a one-minute presentation to another group:
 - A with B;
 - C with D.
- Two minutes to discuss and plan
- Be sure to include time for the group that you're presenting to say what they think.

After the time for discussing and planning is up, the groups are paired and present to each other. We then go through each of the infographics (displayed on the board or PPT) with participants sharing their interpretations and me adding some of mine.

- The West tends to be independent and individualistic while the East is more interdependent and collectivist.
- Some students may struggle being autonomous.
- They usually have much more guidance and clear expectations from teachers while the West tends to promote thinking for oneself and figuring challenges out without much help.
- Some students will try to fit in and not stick out in class.
- Some sayings in the East:
 - The nail that sticks out gets hammered.

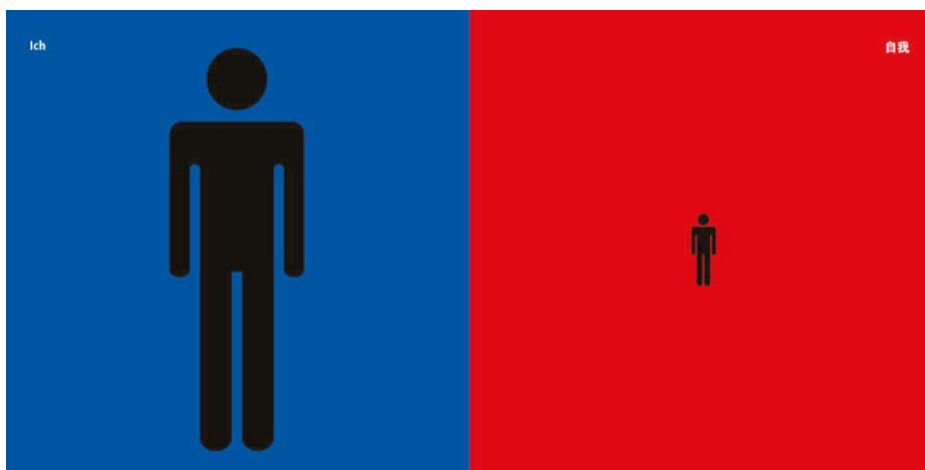


Figure 2: East Meets West – self-perception (adapted from Liu, 2007)

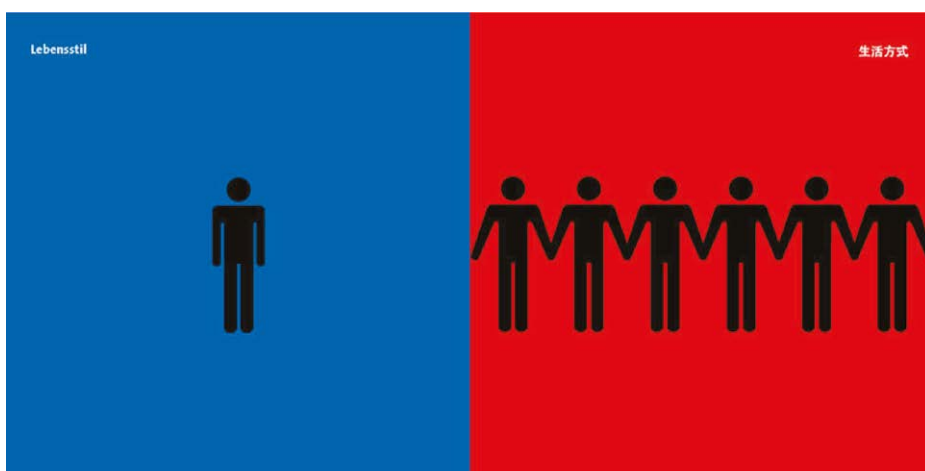


Figure 3: East Meets West – Lifestyle (adapted from Liu, 2007)

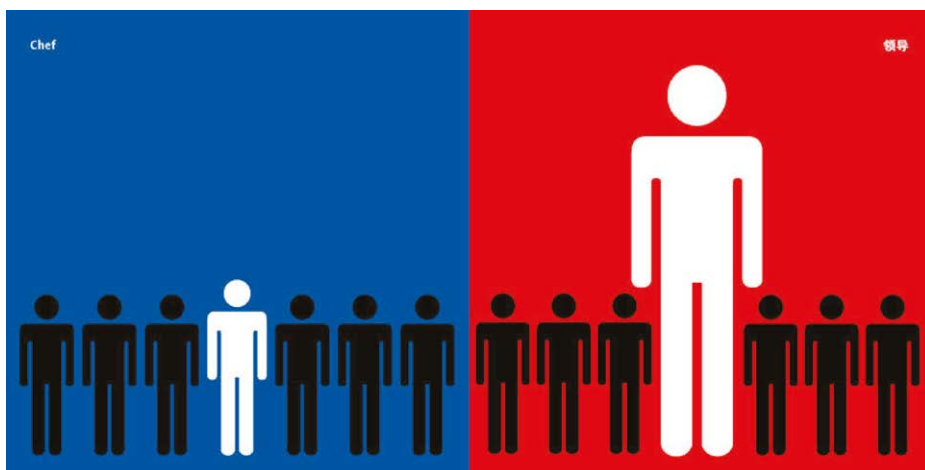


Figure 4: East Meets West – the boss (adapted from Liu, 2007)

- The chicken that sticks its head outside the cage gets it sliced off.
- Usually, members of a group (students in a class) want to keep harmony among the group.
- Answering a question no one else knows could make one be seen as a showoff.

While this is labelled as 'the boss' it essentially represents how authority is

viewed including bosses, government officials, teachers and other people in power compared to those which they manage, supervise and/or govern. The power distance in the West tends to be much less than that in the East. Western teachers (and bosses) tend to be more friendly, and this is liked by the group. The idea of being 'one of the guys' is rather strong (though some distance in the power relationship remains). A teacher or boss in



the West who is overbearing and unfriendly towards subordinates will likely be met with disgruntlement and perhaps rebellion. The idea of 'I'm big, you're small. I'm right, you're wrong' does not go very well in the West. In the East though, this is the norm. The power distance can be very large. Students do not ask many questions and do not challenge the teacher in any way. In some countries, bowing to teachers is still normal. The teacher is the source of knowledge and is thus considered to know essentially everything about what they are teaching. This can influence EAP classes in some of the following ways:

- Some students may expect to be told what to do as they are accustomed to being micromanaged.
- Some students may expect teachers to know everything.
- Some students may not be used to 'friendly' teachers.
- There may be a possible fear of teachers.
- Some students may be reluctant to ask questions and speak in class in general.

Group discussion 2 (12 mins)

Having explored some cultural differences which might influence our EAP lessons at Sino-foreign higher education, I tell participants that we will focus on three aspects which were found

in the spring 2024 study (Bradford, 2025a:285–304; Bradford, 2025b:305–328) to be sources of difficulty: Chinese high school students being reluctant to speak and English mistakes or issues due to interference from their first language and culture. I ask participants to discuss the following questions (about two minutes each) in their groups:

- What is high school in China like?
- Why are some students reluctant to speak?
- What are some mistakes students make in English which are caused by L1 (and/or cultural) interference?

During the discussions, I monitor to help anyone struggling to think of ideas. After each question, we come back together and I ask participants to share ideas and we discuss some as a group.

Walk, read, chat (12 mins)

I then ask attendees to walk around the room and read and discuss quotes with others related to the three aspects which came from my 2014 study (Bradford, 2025a:285–304; Bradford, 2025b:305–328). See *Resources Online* at https://pavilionelt.com/wp-content/uploads/MET34.5_OnlineResources_QuotesFromStudents_Bradford2.pdf After around five minutes, we come back together and participants share their

thoughts and takeaways from the quotes. I then summarise them in relation to the three themes, as well as add other information to help explain them based on my experience working in Chinese schools.

Public high school in China

The focus of English education

Much of the focus in Chinese high school is the *Gakao* (the national college entrance exam). It mainly focuses on reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary and translation with much less attention being given to listening (Tao & Aryadoust, 2024). As such, many schools do not place great emphasis (if any) on speaking and listening or communicative methods in general (Howlett, 2022). With such an emphasis on exams, students are usually accustomed to rote memorisation and everything needed coming from textbooks (Zhao, 2016). Critical thinking is not often developed. Furthermore, students may be unfamiliar with citing, referencing and other academic skills (formal versus informal terminology). Additionally, the aspects of English taught (and the insensitivity of how they are taught) tends to differ greatly between various regions resulting in different levels of English, with some areas not giving much attention to speaking and listening (Tao & Aryadoust, 2024). The coast tends to be at a higher level of English than inland and it lowers as you move west. Likewise, there can

be major differences between rural and urban areas (Howlett, 2022).

The impact of large classes

Some classes can range from 40 to over 100 students. I have taught classes of 60 and Wang (2023) states that classes of 40–60 are the norm. Due to such a large amount of pupils per class, the teaching approach tends to be rather teacher-centred (Wang & Gao, 2008; Wang, 2023). Typically, the teacher lectures from the front of the class (there is often a stage for them) and students, sitting in straight lines and rows, attentively take notes (Zhao, 2016). Likewise, students are usually told exactly what they need to study for and thus may lack autonomy. Once in EAP, concepts such as self-study, figuring out stuff on their own and critical thinking may be rather new. As Zhang (2024) points out, high schools in China may focus on rote memorisation and discourage critical thinking, collaboration and creativity. Additionally, there may be little (if any) groupwork or pairwork which is not only related to the number of students and teaching style, but also the layout of classrooms. Some resemble lecture halls while others may feature desks bolted to the ground.

Reluctant to speak

Face

Face has a major influence in Asia and is ingrained from a young age. While you can gain it by doing well, the fear of losing it is much greater. Making mistakes can lead to others laughing at you and thinking that you are stupid, which is embarrassing and causes you to lose face (Soo & Goh, 2017). Thus, there is a fear of making mistakes which results in students being unwilling to speak, at times. It is better to remain silent than risk ridicule. This is exemplified by a participant in Zhao (2016) who related students' silence in class to their fear of losing face due to considering their English speaking to be subpar.

Previous educational system

Due to the rather large number of students per classroom, there is little (if any) time for groupwork, pairwork or questions to be asked by students. Zhao (2016) states that students should not interrupt the teacher with questions as it could be interpreted as challenging the teacher,

Students do not ask many questions and do not challenge the teacher in any way. In some countries, bowing to teachers is still normal. The teacher is the source of knowledge and is thus considered to know essentially everything about what they are teaching.

making it seem that they did not do a good job teaching. Asking questions is frowned upon if not discouraged. Furthermore, relating to face, asking questions may make one seem dumb. Additionally, there is a group mentality which plays a role and everyone wants to fit in with the class. Overall, there is a concept of 'if everyone else is silent, I should be too'.

A foreigner!

Some students may have never seen a foreigner before. They may be unaccustomed to people of different ethnicities. While this comes with natural curiosity, there may also be hesitation to interact along with cases which could be considered as racist and/or uncomfortable for teachers and students. For example, I've had university students in EAP classes rub my arms to feel the hair (most Chinese don't have as much body hair as Westerners). Furthermore, students, hiring committees and other stakeholders may be a preference for L1-speaking teachers of English and/or white people over L2 and/or people of colour, which is often accompanied by stereotypes and racism (Lan, 2022; Wang, 2024). Additionally, different cultures sometimes have different ways of thinking and viewing certain aspects of life. Such differences may lead to misunderstandings and issues when people of different cultures interact. In attempts to avoid potential conflict, some students may not interact with foreign teachers much (this was mentioned by some participants in Zhao, 2016). Furthermore, they may consider misunderstandings to be due to cultural differences.

L1 interference and English mistakes

Organisation

In Chinese, the main point typically comes later in a text, maybe even last and the

writing builds it up, whereas English writing tends to lead with a clear topic sentence or thesis statement. English also tends to feature more transition language (i.e. signposting). Therefore, English writing is considered as rather direct, while Chinese is more indirect. Additionally, paragraphs in Chinese may be of varying lengths. Some long ones may be followed by short ones (sometimes just one sentence) which may summarise or emphasise the previous one and introduce or link to the following one (Hamp-Lyons and Zhang, 2001:101-116).

Vocabulary and grammar

Some words have many different meanings while some can have several different translations (going both ways). Furthermore, word families are rather different. In terms of grammar, there are no tenses nor verb conjugations like in English; concepts such as these are often conveyed via context or other means (Chang, 2001:310-324). While some syntax is the same (subject-verb-object), it can be very different with complex sentences. Additionally, certain features (e.g. verbs) can be omitted at times. Another interesting feature is that while typing in English, students may not leave a space after punctuation. This is due to Chinese punctuation including a space automatically.

Gaokao's influence

How to gain high marks on the biggest exam in Chinese youths' lives is not exactly clear. In terms of English writing, long, complex sentences with advanced terms and fixed phrases along with attractive handwriting tend to garner favourable results (Thorpe, 2017; GTIIT, 2019). However, some phrases may carry little true meaning in English, not be academic, and/or be used formulaically by most students to the

point of being cliché (e.g. *more and more, as is known to all, with the development of science and technology*).

Teacher preferences

Due to such linguistics differences, students may feel more at ease with a teacher who knows their L1 (Chang, 2010). Thus, allowing them to check for understanding and ask questions in their first language (Liu *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, some concepts may be easier understood between people of the same culture and language.

Group task (4 mins)

The next stage serves as an opportunity for participants to further examine a potential difficulty related to linguistic differences between English and Chinese which may occur. I tell a story about the time when I shared an office at a Sino-foreign university with another foreign gentlemen. He had recently arrived in China and was still rather unfamiliar with the language and culture. One day, during his office hours, a student came to visit to seek help with an assignment. During their conversation, he became rather confused about one of her utterances: 'People open their air conditioners which causes pollution'.

I ask participants to discuss what they think she meant for a minute. We then come back together and share ideas. The student meant to say 'turn on' instead of 'open'. I then ask attendees to consider why she said 'open'. This is basically the

student translating a word in Chinese into English: 开空调 (kāi kōng tiáo) means 'turn on the air conditioner' (with 开 (kāi) meaning 'turn on'). However, 开 (kāi) has different meanings and can be translated differently in English:

- 开门 (kāi mén) – open (the) door
- 开车 (kāi chē) – drive (a) car
- 开灯 (kāi dēng) – turn on (the) lights
- 开始 (kāi shǐ) – start
- 开心 (kāi xīn) – happy

This is an example of a word in one language having several different translations in the other. As I was rather familiar with Chinese when this misunderstanding occurred, I knew what the student was trying to say and was able to explain the differences to her and my officemate and help them to not be lost in translation.

Group discussion 3 (10 mins)

In this session, participants are asked to discuss in their groups what could be helpful in overcoming the challenges mentioned earlier for three minutes. We then share ideas and I discuss some of my suggestions.

Firstly, teachers should try to be understanding and patient with students. Some instructors go into English teaching positions in various locations around the world and try to approach teaching the same way in each situation.

“ The idea is that, if we better understand where our students are coming from, we can better help them make the transition into English academia, essentially helping them bridge the gap. ”

Some attempt to approach education the same way they would in their own country (particularly true of Western teachers). This approach tends to lead to uneasiness, misunderstandings, confusion and frustration for teachers and students (Zhao, 2016). This is exemplified by an instructor in Bradford (2025b:305–328) describing challenges encountered upon arrival in China while attempting to teach in the same way they had in their homeland. Therefore, teachers should not expect students to be the same as those in the West nor expect them to be familiar with certain aspects of academic English (essay structure, citing).

Instead, instructors should consider students' backgrounds in terms of their culture and L1. Regarding culture, they should understand norms such as: power distances; taboos; communication styles; and students' previous education style (what is expected of teachers and students, typical interactions, how English was taught to them before). As for language, understanding similarities and differences between lexis, grammar and writing conventions can help instructors predict possible issues students may have and then scaffold them. Though it is incorrect to require teachers to fully learn their students' culture(s) and language(s), familiarity with them is often very beneficial to both parties. Zhao (2016) as well as Harper and Sun (2022) also believe foreign teachers should learn about the background of their students to better understand various challenges which may



occur between them, along with manage such instances. The idea is that, if we better understand where our students are coming from, we can better help them make the transition into English academia, essentially helping them bridge the gap.

I also tell participants to try to see from their students' perspective. I ask the teachers if they studied at a university which conducted classes in a language different from their L1 and if they have ever written an essay or made a presentation in a foreign language. Hopefully, this raises some awareness and empathy towards the struggles students are facing.



Final thoughts / Q & A (5 mins)

The next stage is where I summarise what we explored in the session and end with some final thoughts.

I tell participants that academic English is challenging, even for L1 speakers. I share how I struggled writing essays in English when I started my MA TESOL studies despite being an L1 speaker, mostly due to having only written short texts in high school and most of my university studies being conducted in different languages (I was a foreign language major). EAP is even more challenging for English language learners (ELLs). They are learning a new language and academic skills in addition to a new educational culture. Therefore, it is important to be patient and understanding of students as they transcend into EAP and English-mediated academia.

I strongly believe teachers should become familiar with the backgrounds of their students. Such knowledge will help instructors predict and understand issues they may have, as well as help scaffold them. Also, showing students you (are trying to) understand their language and culture helps build rapport. They see and appreciate that you are trying to understand them and their ways, and not just trying to teach your foreign language and education style (which would otherwise seem somewhat like colonisation).

The workshop ends with me answering any questions attendees have and thanking them for their participation.

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Mitchell R. Bradford Jr. teaches EAP, coaches football and trains teachers in China. He holds degrees in foreign languages (Southern Arkansas University) and TESOL (the University of Nottingham-Ningbo, China). Mitchell is

partaking in TESOL doctoral studies at the University of St Andrews exploring the challenges of EAP teachers (and students) at Sino-foreign institutions and teacher professional development. mitchellbradford56@yahoo.com