

## *Nurturing Hybrid Student Voice in the US and China*

Xiaodi Zhou, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley,\* US

---

### **ABSTRACT**

This article deals with the student's voice in the US and China, chronicling the author's experiences as a student and instructor in each context. The contention that one cultural-educational tendency is shifting towards the other is introduced—the importance of prioritizing students' authentic voices in their education in the classroom. With examples of students' voices in both cultural contexts, this article presents the merits of nurturing these distinct perspectives in the classroom. Different formats for instruction are presented for encountering these voices and different means of enacting dialogic learning. By building on notions of hybridity and dialogue, this paper invokes a metaperspective of pedagogy that pluralizes traditional notions confined by culture, language, and nationality to an inclusive twenty-first-century global perspective.

*Keywords:* Hybridity, Educational Systems, US and China, Dialogic Pedagogy, Student Voice, Digital Pedagogy

### **INTRODUCTION**

I was born in China many years ago and left for the US after the first grade. Schools and teachers in China are held in high esteem, a segment of society that has for millennia molded successive generations of high academic caliber as measured by standardized tests and other batteries of assessment (Cheng & Feng, 2013). As a student there, I remember being terrified in class. Deathly scared of speaking up and timidly swallowing every question/comment. Fearful of proposing the wrong conjecture as I sat still in my seat amidst columns of others. I never expressed thought. The only voice sanctioned, venerated, and permitted was the teacher's "correct" one. Only those matching what the teacher had in mind were condoned when students spoke.

Second grade in the US seemed like chaos on my first day as I sat quietly and watched rambunctious classmates get up and seemingly do whatever they wanted (almost like in *The Lord of the Flies*, a novel I would later read and love). Their internal desires, their id, seemed to be sated at every turn as they hollered and laughed at whim. My classmates worked in groups, planned and performed skits, asked the teacher questions out loud, and wondered about things we were learning individually and with each other. I was shocked by the behavior, but as time wore on, I started to engage actively in what we were learning, letting my passions, emotions, and voice take center stage. Years later, as an adult, I returned to China as an English instructor at a college for three

---

\* Assistant Professor, Literacy Studies

years with almost my entire educational life in the US, yearning to bring more dialogic student-centered Western pedagogy rather than the rote memorization that I believed ruled Chinese contexts.

## **CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT**

In reality, I recently noticed a shift in educational tendencies. In many US classrooms today, students are taught to be passive recipients of data of various standards of learning deemed developmentally appropriate to master for that grade level as China begins to try more dialogic student-centered learning (Tobin, Hsueh., & Karasawa, 2009). In the former context, students memorize instruction points, criteria adults consider essential to understanding to give the child the best advantage in our globally competitive landscape. They are engaged mainly in what Freire (1970) termed “banking education,” where knowledge is deposited by the teacher like coins in a piggy bank and is stored and accessed by the student as needed. Students become “containers to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be, the better students they are” (p. 70).

As a first-grader in China, I was a meek receptacle to be filled with information each day. I yearned to approximate what my teacher wanted me to say and then say that phrase verbatim. So the discourse was authoritative where one voice was recognized as correct, and all others were erroneous or superfluous. Regardless of how considerate or competent the teacher is, how multivoiced or dynamic the textbook is, or how progressive and innovative the curriculum is, there is still a knowledge possessor/depositor and a knowledge deficient recipient. In this type of classroom, the students are the passive audience of learning and engage in the unquestioning synthesis of current learning with background knowledge and concurrent material.

On the other hand, in a dialogic classroom, the expressions of any one student or teacher are suitable for consideration, debate, and affirmation/refutation within reason. Any party’s academic input, whether in speech, writing, or other representational forms, even those of the teacher’s, is ripe for a thoughtful review. The most shocking part about my second-grade classroom in the US was that students openly questioned the teacher. Instead of seeing it as a challenge to her authority, she would consider the issue from the child’s perspective. With that said, the child’s opinions were generally deemed unworthy or inappropriate by the teacher as she praised the contribution but redirected the conversation. However, I was shocked that the teacher changed her

mind on a few occasions due to the student's comments, such as the significance of a particular word or event or the author's intentions in writing the text. My world seemed to collapse before my eyes like a beacon of authority in my life came crashing down, tumbled by a peer no less.

But, what I saw in that US classroom was not chaos but rather the knowing grin of a classmate, who became more engaged in the rest of the lesson. This type of instruction requires the humility of the instructor, whose position is less on a podium than on a conductor's step where they can oversee the entire orchestra, careful not to let certain sections drown out others or veer too far from the score. The result of dialogic innervation and mutual effect is ideal hybridity, which to Bakhtin (1981) is a "mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from each other by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor" (p. 358).

## **METHODS**

For this paper, I conducted an autoethnography (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015), as I utilized my "personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences" (p. 1). As such, I reflected on my instructional experiences in two cultural and linguistic contexts with new understandings of cultural and linguistic theories to come to insights into my instructional practices and the relationship between my teaching, my students, and our synthesis of learning. I utilized "deep and careful reflection – typically referred to as 'reflexivity'" to recollect and make sense of my experiences within their unique cultural, linguistic, gendered, and epochal markers (p. 2). My written reflections totaled 32 pages of rough notes.

Having spent considerable time in both locales, I have intimate cultural and linguistic knowledge of both settings. As I reflected on my teaching and living experiences in each context, I documented my thinking in notes before writing, serving as a foundation for my writing. I also looked over former students' works and photographs to embellish my reflection. Autoethnography is considered qualitative research that "focuses on experience and meaning [and] is intensely personal and introspective" (Wall, 2006, p. 150). I identified and highlighted patterns and themes in my notes and used these codes to base my discussion. So, my reflections synthesized my classroom memories in China and the US with new theoretical and pedagogical learnings.

## EFFORTS TOWARDS STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOMS

Having been educated since the age of seven in the US, I yearned to bring my progressive vision for learning to Chinese students. There were no tests and minimal notes so students could focus on active participatory learning of the topics and internalize the learning process over just the content, which they may forget immediately after the test. There would be many classroom discussions with in-class individual and group writing assignments when I asked them to write passionately. I imagined students fighting to ask questions and clamoring over each other to offer their opinions, finally freed to be themselves, unfettered by strict authoritative parameters engaged in experiential learning. I dreamed of myself as Robin Williams' Mr. Keating in *Dead Poet Society*, a film I showed my class in hopes of inspiring their creativity. I wanted a sense of otherness from diverse opinions within my classroom, inciting new understanding.

What occurred inside my Chinese classroom that first semester, when I instructed third and fourth-year undergraduate English majors, was anything but this dialogic synergy of voices. The courses I taught were Advanced English Writing, Extensive English Reading, and Western Civilization. I would lecture interspersed with frequent student-directed activities. Students would actively engage in what we were learning, like letter-writing or personal responses to specific passages or events, and have conversations about the topics or the texts. However, what often happened during these student-led segments was numb silence, where students sat passively and looked at me inquisitively as if to ask with their frowns, "Aren't you the one who is paid to teach us?" At the same time, when I observed colleagues teach their courses, they usually lectured the entire time in front of the class. Still, I struggled to stick to my open, participatory teaching philosophy, as I willfully ignored the cultural and instructional climate my students were used to (Sung & Pederson, 2012). As an English instructor, I almost felt pushed by my school to force my "Americanness" onto my students and completely disregard students' own vibrant heritage cultures and dialects.

In this climate that I created, there was not a simultaneity of voices, an encounter of different perspectives, or *I*-positions (Hermans, 2001), for the only worthwhile *I*-position was my own, supposedly the closest representative of an authentic Western cultural perspective. Every Wednesday, another American teacher and I would lead English Corner, a weekly seminar for non-English majors to practice conversing in English. The English language became a cultural and

social capital (Sung & Pederson, 2012), and attendees often came to hear native English and try practicing choice expressions. In this respect, there was still a one-directional movement of knowledge and skill from an “expert” to a “novice.” It was this unidirectional limited voice that my students heard and respected. In this climate, I yearned to engage my pupils in expanding their thinking and ideas to come into contact with each other’s to germinate hybridity in thought. However, in practice, I had mistakenly promulgated monoglossic instruction by only recognizing and exalting student-led Western-style classrooms as good learning conditions.

My first semester ended poorly with low student evaluations and negative peer observation feedback, and my dialogic approach to instruction was in somewhat of a disarray. But, something did give me a glimmer of promise. My email would be sprinkled with students’ comments and questions each evening. One student even addressed me as “O captain, my captain,” referring to what Williams’ students called him (from Walt Whitman’s poem) in *Dead Poet’s Society*. I realized their silence in the classroom was most likely due to their fear of social repercussions and others’ judgments. I needed to engage them by connecting with them personally and culturally, which was awkward given my insider-outsider perspective (Ergun & Erdemir, 2009), as a Chinese-born Chinese American who had lived the majority of my life in the US and was illiterate in Chinese. I struggled to understand my own cultural identity in their context. I understood I needed to learn the stories and narratives of my Chinese students and get to know them by truly listening to their voices via language. I realized the importance of prioritizing and cultivating students’ voices and vowed to do this in my future instruction. I also realized that authentic student voice was essential for student-centered instruction and understanding the idiosyncratic needs of our pupils.

### ***Knowing our Students***

Differentiation in the classroom is one of the practices preservice teachers learn; a standard of instruction in diverse classrooms, both in terms of cultures and abilities. In order to do so, we need to understand our students and their unique voices. One of the most powerful ways to get to know students is by keeping a writer’s journal. Sharing these journals at the end of the class provided a forum for some reticent students to be more vocal and share with their classmates and me. I also reminded them of the confidentiality of these journals and the penalty for sharing classmates’ personal stories outside of our classroom.

Even though many of my male students were relatively taciturn in class, they often wrote beautiful and achingly personal journals. In particular, one burley male student I had at a university in rural Georgia sat in the front each week with his camouflaged hunting cap and a wide grin. As I went over the syllabus, policy dictated that I had to add a campus carry policy for firearms. I jokingly told them not to tell me if anyone did carry one because it would frighten me. I had not expected anyone in my class to be armed. That student waited until the rest of the class left that first day and then walked up to me, and guiltily confessed that he did, in fact, carry a gun. I assured him that it was ok and that I was only (half) kidding.

This student wrote some of the most beautiful and expressive journal entries, but he never shared them. When there were only two weeks left of the semester, he raised his hand, and to my surprise, read an extremely personal piece about his grandfather passing away. He was inspired by his classmates, who shared very personal and emotional entries. He recounted how his grandfather had taught him to hunt and bought him his first rifle. He wrote that he always remembered Sundays spent in the woods with his grandfather and the bond they forged on those trips, of the quiet yet deep conversations they shared, when he learned many things about his grandfather that he had never known. He always thinks of his grandfather whenever he hunts now, feeling as if he were there with him.

As he read, his smile suddenly turned awry, and I could see a glimmer of a tear at the edge of his eye. When he finished, he was sobbing heavily, heaving up and down, and wiping away tears with his fingers, as his voice cracked with grief. I looked around the alcove where our class met to share each week, and many of his classmates' eyes were wet as well. Writing journals and sharing select entries was a great way for classmates to get to know each other and for me to understand them and the various *I*-position we all carry that may not be readily perceptible to everyone. Listening to these stories and valuing the courage it took to share vulnerable truths told my students that writing from the heart was valued in my classroom and that an effective teacher supports candor and vulnerability in his or her students.

### ***Students' Cultural and Personal Voices***

Genuinely getting to know one's students and their stories and interests is crucial for differentiating instruction. When I taught argumentative writing in China, I had initially assigned prompts, like "Do you agree with the need to protect the environment" and "Where do you stand on gun control."

To my dismay, my students were not eager to argue these points. I realized these were topics I thought were important for them, not their own priorities. The following semester, I gave my students the option to argue an issue of their choosing with a partner. What resulted was a lively, engaged debate on issues that mattered to them, ranging from topics like “who would make a better husband, a man like the Monkey King or one like Pigsy (two key characters in the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*)” to “should we legalize same-sex marriage.”

The Monkey King represented a clever, athletic, good-looking mate, while Pigsy was a more unattractive, clumsy, and easily beguiled type. Yet, the Monkey King was not sensitive and caring towards the opposite gender, while Pigsy was very tender toward women. These two characters were pitted against each other, and the class was split between those who preferred men (or preferred to be men) like the former and those who preferred the latter. The class became lively, each student clamoring over the other as their cultural funds of knowledge were accessed for our debate. My dream had come true, and I realized it needed an ingredient that I could not give; it needed my students’ voices and cultural repertoire.

Differentiating instruction in such classrooms involves students’ choice to study, research, and read and write about their chosen topic. One of my students in the US was fanatic about riding horses and regularly participated in and won competitions. She wrote a personal narrative of riding her horse for her multigenre piece, including a detailed recipe for her horse’s favorite meal. She wrote a nonfiction informational piece about the species. She created a digital video of her and her horse jumping poles (without a helmet, to my horror). She also pasted several of her medals and ribbons and photos of her and her favorite horse at competitions ([Figure 1](#)).

With these multigenre assignments on their chosen topic, student engagement is differentiated by form and interest, intersecting with their lived experiences (Romano, 2000). I remember one student who had just moved to our college from another town because a tornado swept up her home; she composed her project *about* tornadoes ([Figure 2](#)). She wrote about her family’s harrowing ordeal through the disaster via multiple genres. She even personified the tornado in a short narrative and made a tornado model out of cotton.

Students then shared and commented on others’ work, engaging with classmates. Students also participated in a dialogue of the different genres, or forms, and with the content of their lives. I asked them to be creative with their mixing of styles. To teach them the beauty of combining and

remixing genres, I played the posthumous 2004 track *Ghetto Gospel* by Tupac Shakur<sup>†</sup> This song meshes Elton John's 1971 *Indian Sunset* with Tupac's poetic verses about inner-city life, combining ingenious lyrics about poverty and racial injustices against a backdrop of a soulful melody chronicling the defeat of a Native American warrior at the hands of a white man. Both the hip hop and symphonic rock songs address the theme of racial subjugation but do so via two different genres and styles.

When I played the song in class, my students were inspired by the soothing ballad interspersed with the powerful hip hop lyrics, as their eyes lit up, and students commented how they loved the mix of genres in a single piece of music. They told me they understood what mixing genres meant and how beautiful the product could be. When the speaker's message is presented in hybrid, multiple ways or via different forms of expression, as well as via the conjunction of those differences, that message is given greater agency and beauty, representing the different *I*-positions conveyed through our complex voices, while also possibly expanding its reach to a broader audience. For instance, in the former example, both listeners of hip hop and those of symphonic rock may appreciate the message and the song, which modulates between the two styles.

I showed my students that their work was not confined strictly to prose or writing. As a result, my students painted vibrant landscapes and portraits and built models of automobiles and houses. One hard-of-hearing student created a beautiful picture book of her life titled *Silent World* and described how the world communicated with her using beautiful watercolor illustrations and ASL signs ([Figures 3, 4 & 5](#)). Her silent voice was so powerful, as the reader could see and feel her reality through engaging with the world as she experienced it. Another student who was a dancer did her multigenre project on her father, who passed away when she was young. For one of her genres, she choreographed and performed a dance in memory of her dad set to his favorite country music song. It was beautiful, personal, poetic, and authentic. When she showed the video to the class, there were tears in everyone's eyes. The class understood how language and dialogue could come in many modalities and were most potent when deeply personal and authentic. They also learned the power of communication and how best to teach students to wield that to express themselves

---

<sup>†</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Do5MMmEygsY>

By having them respond to videos, engage in and reflect on reading, participate in group work, write and share journals, and compose multigenre projects while reacting to others' comments, I wanted to show students the range of options they have for assessing students as well as the modalities in which they can instruct. I wanted them to understand how we needed to give options within the parameters of our instructional goals. I wanted them to understand the beauty of differentiating by engaging in the same process themselves, not solely by filling in the section on differentiation of instruction in their lesson plan template. I wanted them to know that, in addition to auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic learners, there was also a multitude of different cultures and languages, different interests and affinities, different abilities, different personal stories, different genres of texts (e.g., graphic novels), and different ways of presenting their work (e.g., digital). When these voices were presented together, they created a dialogue with students' distinct learning experiences, prompting heteroglossic understandings of the material from different perspectives. As students respond and react to each other's work, they engage in dialogic construction of learning, as their voices influence their understanding of the topic and the power of language or the modality for conveying their ideas.

A major consideration of differentiating instruction is knowing where our students' strengths lie. This is important so we can use those strengths to help them learn new information by scaffolding new material onto existing abilities or by using those assets to help them learn new content. Many of our students are much more technology-savvy than we are as instructors in the current digital age. They are as Prensky (2001) notes, "digital natives," having grown up immersed in an interconnected technology-dependent world. One aspect of differentiating for these students is allowing them to dialogue digitally in a class wiki or inside a Google Classroom. In such contexts, students are shielded from direct social scrutiny and more likely to give authentic comments and feedback on peers' work. They can also respond at their own pace and convenience to classmates' posts. Their responses and reactions to peers' responses are given sufficient time to germinate. Often these contributions are deeper and richer, more considerate, and less spontaneous and impulsive.

In this scenario, it is possible that students could troll and make insensitive hurtful remarks to each other when they are free from the direct presence of the other or the teacher (Suler, 2004). So, I have found it essential to discuss rules and penalties for disparaging or disrespectful online

language to encourage a culture of respect in these spaces. Some useful platforms I have used include discussion boards in course wikis, personal blogs, Padlet, Google Hangouts, Zoom meetings, and Blackboard Collaborate. I have discovered that each arena has strengths and shortcomings, but all encourage differentiated forms of digital interaction and dialogic engagement. I also discovered that digitally assigning discussion posts for responses to readings before face-to-face meetings incited more active, deeper dialogue amongst students when they returned to class.

### *Student Engagement*

Much of the success of these student-led classrooms then depends on their engagement and participation in the instruction. After the past semester in a southern US university, one student wrote me a note on the last day saying how when I first informed them that there was going to be a lot of student-directed discussions in my course, she was reluctant. She was unsure she could learn and succeed in this type of classroom. She was not used to having much voice in her classes. She was accustomed to just listening to lectures. Initially, she never spoke up except to her desk mate privately. However, as the semester wore on, she became more vocal and engaged as she grew more accustomed to the style of instruction and the expectations for students in the class.

The assignments were also vague for her, as I only gave guidelines, not specific directives. I gave her a choice and tried to make her the owner of her own specific education regarding elementary literacy instruction. I wanted for her to gain insight into how children learn language by delving into her explorations with language by describing her own life and herself so she can garner greater awareness of the process of using language in the service of expression. I prioritized the personal in her education to whet her own appetite for language and literacy (Kamler, 2001). I usually found that when students enjoy literacy themselves when they can see the beauty and power in language, they will truly desire to teach these skills to their own students.

This semester, she shared the designs of her ideal classroom, read her favorite picture book followed by pedagogical implications for her ideal grade, and also composed a multigenre project of her dog including a narrative, stream of consciousness (from the dog's point of view), poetry, and nonfiction. She made a poster with photos of her dog, including artwork and captions. She worked with partners on designing a group lesson plan to teach certain word sounds and wrote a hilarious relay story with other classmates.

Little by little, she spoke up and verbalized authentic connections to the textbook and class topics. Much like my Chinese students, though she was reticent during lessons at the beginning of the semester, she would send me emails to verbalize questions and comments stewing in class. I never asked her to share these in class but waited for her to do so independently. By the end of the semester, she became one of my most engaged students, actively participating in class discussions and offering ideas to her classmates. She understood how to actively engage in real-time with what we were learning, to voice her inner world as an important part of our lessons. She learned to be more open and forthcoming with her wonderings and of herself with her classmates and with me.

I was opening up the corridors for expression increased student commitment to learning and doing the work for my class. Students became more invested, sharing poetry written in their spare time and showing me photographs of their lives. By assigning these personal pieces and valuing them both in my comments on the assignments and in my class when I would reference certain students' works as truly impacting me, I also told them that their lives were important to me, that I wanted to learn about their stories, but also this was what makes the best teachers. Knowing our students' stories can connect our instruction to them and make learning more personally relevant, meaningful, and impactful. For example, I often had my students compose writing or assign projects with their interests as the theme, and I gave them options in how they instructed where they could bring their personal stories to demonstrate to students how to be open and expressive with their world through language.

### **REAL-WORLD CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS**

Nearly all the preservice teachers I taught in the US would teach in public schools and be required to teach to the Common Core State Standards. I found the standards open-ended enough to enact individual ways of instructing the mandated learning goals. I asked my students to be creative in teaching these standards, not to let the standards themselves be the focus of their instruction, but that which was, in their views, the most appropriate points of learning for the students at that particular point in the school year. I asked them to consider how these standards assumed the same resources (cultural, linguistic, economic, etc.) for all students and were meant only to deem a worthy student as measured by standardized assessment guidelines. Such climate limited what our students learned and what and how they could teach. I reminded them never to forget who they or their students were.

I asked them to consider that as teachers, if we can expect the same contributions, or even assess from identical rubrics, the plethora of different learners we have in our classes. How can we assess in a monoglossic singular modality when our students present such heteroglossic multiplicities? This may be one of the reasons why so many successful individuals were never that successful in school. They became tech giants, writers, entertainers, and inventors, changing the world and our daily lives with their creative voices while failing or dropping out of school, or never attending college. In our classrooms, are we only teaching our students how to be students or preparing them for the diverse and complex world? With the codification and standardization of education, I asked my students to try to find ways to practice critical pedagogy in the classroom where they also seek to liberate their students from monoglossic thinking, even if it were only via their own welcoming dispositions.

When I returned to China last year, I visited a new school that had just been built on the outskirts of Nanjing. The institution was called *Xing Zhi*, or literally Knowing by Doing. When I visited their classrooms, I saw students out of their seats working with each other, building things. I saw a pond with water-lilies and a communal vegetable garden outside, and students watering, fertilizing, measuring, photographing, and sketching the plants (Refer to Figure 6-8). Plastered on the walls along the hallway were rows of student work. Unlike in many other Chinese schools, the students did not wear a uniform. They talked about their own experiences in relation to the class content, whether it be different cultures, animals, or even ideas, like friendship and personalizing learning. [Figure 6](#), [Figure 7](#), and [Figure 8](#)

There was individuality and energy I had not remembered since my own experiences as a child in the West. The principal told me he wanted this educational reform because not every student is suited to be a scholar, researcher, or white-collar professional. He wanted to prepare students to reach their potential by doing whatever suited their interests and abilities. He also wanted to rid the stigma of physical work as being of lesser value. This type of institution was still in the minority in China, but I could feel this unspoken recognition for implementing this shift in pedagogy to active student-centered dialogic active learning, preparing students to succeed in their world.

Here in the US, I have visited middle and secondary classrooms where students read classic novels like *Their Eyes were Watching God* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and in addition to

responding to the actual text, wrote and shared a home language narrative about a vignette of their families in their own family dialects ([Appendix](#)). Classmates then responded and reflected on each others' writing. I heard rural Southern speech, African American English, Puerto Rican Spanish, Cuban Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and Brazilian Portuguese laced in and constructing those family accounts, especially family meals and heritage celebrations, like during quinceañera, Carnival, and La Posada. Those scenes were given greater authenticity because the languages in which they occurred were preserved, such as the expressions when dancing the Bomba at parties. Their voices, and those of their families, were presented as an homage to Hurston and Lee. So, not only were they transacting with the stories they were reading, ones with deep familial ties, they were also initiating a dialogue set in the present time, where the same motifs of identity and social injustices were still alive in their lived day-to-day realities.

### ***Dialogue Between Schools and Families***

Opening the lines of dialogue with the families of our students then is critical in providing more holistic care and education for each of them. Parents often have questions or concerns about how their child is doing in the classroom, both academically and socially, of information that is amiss from a rubric or grade sheet, while teachers often wonder if the child has adequate resources at home to succeed. Open dialogue between parents and schools can create a more inviting context and lead to more genuine and responsive spaces at school and at home.

For example, while teaching in China, I had one undergraduate English major, Q, who was older than his classmates. Q sat in the back of the class and wore a grin on his face, and never uttered a word. I never knew if he understood my lessons, but somehow, I could tell he could hold his own in a fight. I had my students keep weekly journals, and one week, I asked them to write about their families. Q wrote that he came from a small farming village on the province's outskirts. His family worked a sorghum farm and was always struggling to meet the bills, including for the iPhone, which the family had just purchased. The single child policy was more lenient in farming communities, so Q was the youngest of five children who had all left the farm for the city. His father was nearly seventy, and every time he traveled back to his village, he would always stay with his parents and check on how they were doing.

Q wrote in that journal entry how the last time he went back home, he saw his father still working in the fields at dusk, his back crooked in the waning daylight. Upon seeing his father, he

brushed aside a tear and picked up a hoe to work alongside him. They made it back as the first stars fell on the deep grey sky, walking side by side (I imagined Q with the same grin). Q wrote that because his dad felt so strongly about his education that he worked extra hours in the fields to help with Q's growing tuition. Given all of his physical sacrifices to support his son's university tuition, he must have had many things to ask the teachers of his son. Although his father could not read or write and could not have participated in a written dialogue journal, perhaps a family dialogue journal built around voice messages may better accommodate such students' families. This would have allowed the school to understand more of Q's own story by conveying what life was like for Q and his family back home and their concerns and priorities.

### *Hybridity in Students' Stories*

Our students come to us with different stories and backgrounds. Hybridity in the classroom encourages the dialogic innervation of ideas and the formats for presenting those ideas so that learning becomes multiple from different perspectives. "Truths" in my courses are less set-in-stone than negotiable ideas. For any text we were studying, ideas regarding the words had to consider the multiple voices of students to conjure a notion that incorporated the ideas of several, making the final product a dialogic mixture of truths and reading experiences. In speaking and writing, I also sought hybridity by encouraging trans-languaging expressions (Garcia & Li, 2014), wherein my students could use any language of their choosing to author their compositions both in China and in the US, much like the middle school student in Florida had done.

Additionally, I had my students conduct relay and collaborative stories, in which they all contributed to a single story, which is apt also to be trans-languaging. In these ways, readership and authorship become hybrid in terms of perspectives and languages. The ideas for my course were multifaceted and multivoiced. Hybridity in students' voices is this co-construction and collaborative manufacture of meaning and "truths." Sometimes, student voices are innervated by each other, by the text, by the teacher, and by their own different cultural and linguistic *I*-positions, so that that speech becomes more than the singular utterance of one. In dialogic classrooms, students' expressions are apt to be colored by those of many others. They become a hybrid, heteroglossic manifestation of ideas. This notion involves authentic student voices, or the genuine reflection of an individual, not for purposes of an assignment, but the partial expression of the core of one's existence. This voice is not modulated by dictated parameters of form or content (within

reason) but exposes their inner selves etched with the most profound memories. Much like when my students wrote about their loved ones who had passed away or about their life-long passions, these voices often stay with both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader, influencing their perceptions of each other (and themselves) and the power of language.

So, authentic student voices are when students engage within themselves, with each other, and with the world in a real manner, unencumbered by considerations of teacher guidelines or standards of assessment. They become living human beings making their humanity a catalyst for their learning. Yet, when voices are hybridized, can they still be authentic? When an individual's voice becomes innervated by multiple others', then where is that innate self? I believe our truest selves are always in the process of becoming and so are never set but are forever deluged by a symphony of others' voices influencing our own. This is what happens as we grow and interact with our world, incorporating the voices of multiple others to author new understanding. This is also the goal of schooling and education, where students take classes, listening to and reading the words of others to forge their own. When the voices we take in are also authentic, then our own hybrid voice has partially internalized other distinct genuine *I*-positions by empathizing with their perspective. That heteroglossia or multivoicedness then becomes our voice as we learn to be more considerate and multiple in our dealings with our complex world.

### ***Effect of Student Voice on Me***

Perhaps, my instructional experiment prioritizing students' voices initially failed in China partly because I neglected to consider my students' cultural repertoires and personal backgrounds, and the institutional power structure in China. There was an unspoken rule of conduct, boundaries that the teacher should not cross both in empowering students and instructional content (e.g., democracy). Maybe it would have been better to incorporate digital discussions instead of in-class ones to lessen the social anxiety of speaking in class, given my students' propensity to communicate electronically, both in the US and China. I could have also given students the option to label their responses with their names, though I would have known who was responding to prevent reckless online behavior. Instructional technology could have been an asset to my instruction. This would have invited more student voices in my classroom.

Engaging with my students' voices, first as I read their assignments and then when they shared them with the class, allowed me to truly understand their idiosyncratic positionalities both

as students and as individuals. They became more than a name or a student number. These authentic projects allowed me to truly get to know them, their perspectives, and how they saw their world. Knowing more about their experiences and unique funds of knowledge allows me to cater my instruction to encounter that wealth of know-how. I often had my students use literacy to describe what they were interested in, whether farming, hunting, riding horses, or dancing. When students work in groups to discuss class topics or course readings, dialogue and hybridity in learning can be incited, as group members negotiate their understandings to forge one heteroglossic utterance to the class or to themselves (Bakhtin, 1981). By locating the personal world in their literacy practices, I also made the activity more relevant and meaningful (Kamler, 2001), prompting aspects of their authentic selves to be expressed. For example, multigenre topics are usually aligned to these varying interests. Additionally, many of those students who shared the assigned journals told me they continued keeping them even after graduation, making those literacy experiences extend into their lives after our class.

Beyond their effect on me as an educator, their voices also influenced my own ambivalent cultural identity. For instance, hearing my Chinese students' descriptions of interactions with family members or celebrations made me empathize with and feel more of my Chinese self, recalling those same feelings as a child in China and reconnecting with my heritage. In making me privy to their world, I learned about their cultural outlook and what they prioritized and honored, such as family and Chinese cultural traditions. On the other hand, my students in the US displayed their own creative and personal identities, intersecting with similar positionalities I had experienced in this cultural context. Their stories, in turn, emboldened my US self. Yet, my outsider perspective in both contexts was also made apparent as I listened to their stories and learned from them as someone who did not personally share such experiences (e.g., hunting, farming). I simultaneously felt a part of and excluded from the cultural context in which my students lived, learned, and participated.

### CONCLUSION

What I have experienced in prompting these student-led classrooms in two distinct cultural and linguistic contexts, when successfully implemented, is increased student engagement, where students find their own strengths and potentials via language, in whichever vernacular they choose. I don't want to suggest that all my classes have been wonderful because there have been students

who never warmed up to my instructional style even at the semester's end and gave less than flattering teacher evaluations. Some students wrote that there were not enough guidelines or clear directions of what I expected them to compose. Some of my students also wrote in their evaluations, "Less tears and more smiles." There were days when I felt defeated, both in China and in the US

What got me through the difficult days were the glimmers of a promise I heard in the classroom, the grateful notes and emails, and the funny inside jokes only our class understood, such as when I talked to my class about the importance of spelling and referencing the sign that I saw driving in Georgia for peaches that read "peches." The word "peches" then became an inside joke for our class. This is what open student-oriented classrooms do. They create a class community where students (and the teacher) feel a part of an authentic, larger learning entity, free to offer their voices to nurture it. The best way to create this shared learning experience is to make instruction hybridized and multiple, with each format, dialoguing with the other. Having lived in and visited so many different places around the globe, I know first-hand the diversity and the different ways of knowing out there. This is what makes the world beautiful, and we need to teach our students with the same authentic and inclusive mindset so they can take part in that colorful story of humanity.

I know prioritizing student voices is impactful because I recently found the Facebook page of my burley rural Georgia student and discovered a cropped picture of him and myself above the caption: Bro Life ([Figure 9](#)).



*Figure 1 Student riding her horse*



Figure 2 Artistic piece about tornados.

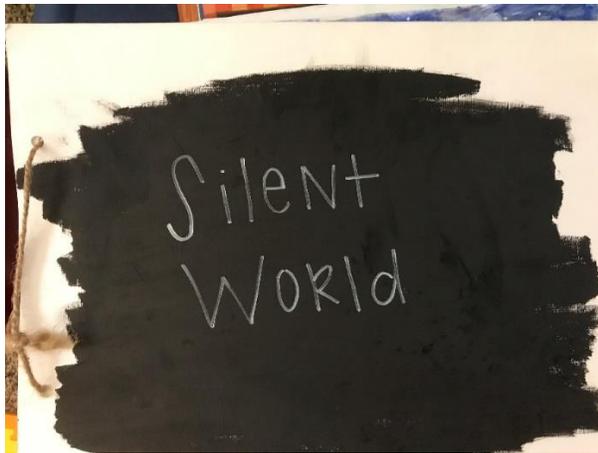
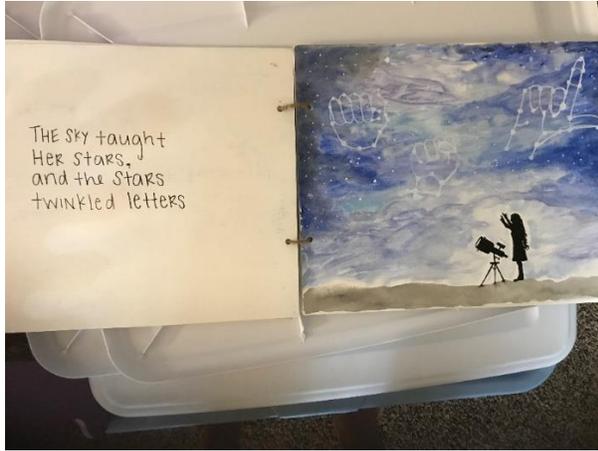


Figure 3 Cover of the picture book



Figure 4: Text on the left page and the right page with illustrations of ASL sign on the last tree for "I love you"



*Figure 5 Text about how the sky taught her stars, with the illustration of the sign for stars and student with telescope*



*Figure 6 Student at the Xing Zhi school photographing water-lilies in the school's pond*



*Figure 7 Primary school class at Xing Zhi*



Figure 8 Xing Zhi students working in the school garden



Figure 9 Cropped photo on the right of my student and me

## APPENDIX

Excerpt of home language narrative describing one student's sister's quinceañera in Puerto Rico:

We flew into Puerto Rico to celebrate Darinelle's entrance into womanhood with our family.

"Rebecca, te tienes que poner este traje! [Rebecca, you have to put on this dress!]" said Keisha. "Keisha, no quiero. Me puedo poner unos pantalones bonitos y una blusa? [Keisha, I don't want to. Can't I put on some nice pants and a blouse?]" I said, "No niña, se supone que tu te pongas un traje! Te vez muy bonita con esa traje con tus ojos. [No child, you're expected to wear your formalwear. You look nice in these clothes. They match your eyes.]" Said Keisha. After a long time arguing, I put on the dress and left for the party.

\*\*\*\*\*

## REFERENCES

- Adams, T.E., Jones, S.H., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Allen, J., Beaty, J., & Dean, A., Jones, J., Mathews, S.S., Schwedler, E., McCreight, J.,

- Simmons, A.M. (2015). *Family Dialogue Journals: School-Home Partnerships that Support Student Learning*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Bakhtin, MM (1981). *Dialogic Imagination*. Michael Holquist & Caryl Emerson (Ed.)(Trans.) Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bhabha, H. (1990). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Blommaert, J. & Rampton, B. (2011). Language and superdiversity: A position paper. *Working Papers in Language and Literacy*, paper 70, pp. 1-22.
- Cheng, Y. & Feng, S. (2013). Access to public schools and the education of migrant children in China. *China Economic Review*, 26(September 2013), 75-88.
- Cummins, J., Early, M., & Still, S. (2011). Chapter 2: Frames of reference: Identity texts in perspective. In J. Cummins and M. Early's (Eds.) *Identity Texts: The Collaborative Creation of Power in Multilingual Schools* (pp. 21-43). Oakhill, VA: Trentham Books Limited.
- Ergun, A. & Erdemir, A. (2009). Negotiating insider and outsider identities in the field: "Insider" in a foreign land; "outsider" in one's own land. *Field Methods*, 22(1), 16-38.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Myra Bergman Ramos (Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- García, O. & Li, W. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hall, T. (2002). *Differentiated Instruction*. Wakefield, MA: National Center on Accessible Educational Materials.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (2001). The dialogical self: Toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Cultural Psychology*, 7(243), 243-281.
- Kamler, B. (2001). *Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- McBrien, J. L., Cheng, R., & Jones, P. (2009). Virtual spaces: Employing a synchronous online classroom to facilitate student engagement in online learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 10(3), 1-17.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants part 1. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.
- Romano, T. (2000). *Blending Genres, Altering Styles: Writing Multigenre Papers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc.
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321-326.
- Sung, K. & Pederson, R. (2012). *Critical ELT Practices in Asia*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Tobin, J. J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Vygotsky, LS (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Wall, S. (2006). An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *Internal Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), 146-160.

Yang, Z. (2013). Demographic changes in China's farmers: The future of farming in China.  
*Asian Social Science*, 9(7), 136.