

Chapter 3

Exploring Third Space Dynamics Among Chinese Learners in a Sino–Foreign University Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter centered on a threefold format of teaching and class arrangement for a Communication major required course, tailored for first-year students at a Sino-foreign cooperative university in China. Reflection from teaching, class observation, focus group and intercultural communication competency survey will be discussed to explore how SoTL can serve as a tool for creating third space dynamics. The hybridity of presence of multilingual instructors, cultural diversity, and thoughtful classroom design fosters intercultural awareness and cultivates a realm of possibilities. It encourages productive instability and prompts the adaptation of one's understanding of 'self' and 'others'.

MY POSITIONALITY AS A SOTL PRACTITIONER

In this chapter, I begin by clarifying my positionality as a SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) practitioner and introduce the challenges I faced when transitioning to a new teaching and learning context. I then discuss the SoTL project I undertook, demonstrating how SoTL can be used as a tool in a Sino-foreign context to enhance both teaching and learning, especially for the Chinese learners. Additionally, I highlight how my SoTL practices, beyond the specific project discussed, have contributed to my professional development. I conclude with reflections as a foreign teaching faculty in China, on the state of SoTL within my department, institution, and at the national level.

As a Malaysian Chinese SoTL practitioner in a Sino-foreign cooperative university in southern China, my positionality is multifaceted and nuanced, shaped by my cultural background, cultural identity, multilingual proficiency, educational experiences, and commitment to inclusive pedagogy. Each of

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these dimensions deeply influences my approach to teaching, learning, and research in the diverse and globalized academic environment where I operate.

I began as a tutor in 2012 at a Chinese-majority private university in Malaysia (with EMI curricula); the divide between my students and me – whether linguistic, cultural, or in identity – is minimal. Doubt and insecurity were low, and sensitivity was diminished. We could readily comprehend each other most of the time. Since the differences were small, and I was facing students who shared more or less the same background (in terms of locality, race, culture, and age) as myself, I did not observe significant interaction or inclusion issues in the classroom. Hence, I never truly saw the need to take SoTL seriously. Moreover, the university where I was teaching was a local Malaysian institution with only a limited number of international students and foreign faculty. The environment felt cohesive, and we largely adhered to established teaching practices without questioning the inclusivity or dynamics of the classroom and therefore, SoTL practices or inquiry was not a pressing concern.

However, things changed in 2018 when I set foot in Zhuhai, China, as a foreign faculty member and began teaching students from China whose backgrounds differ significantly from mine and my previous students. The familiar sense of shared identity I experienced in Malaysia was no longer present. I found myself navigating a new cultural landscape where language, educational expectations, and social norms varied considerably. These differences brought new challenges in terms of communication, interaction, and inclusivity in the classroom. It was at this point that I began to recognize the importance of SoTL, as I needed to develop strategies to bridge the cultural gaps, foster understanding, and create an inclusive learning environment for my students.

Over the past six years, I've taken on various roles in a Sino-foreign cooperative university in southern China: as an assistant professor in the Public Relations and Advertising program, as the program director for the Master of Communication, as an associate professor in the Department of Communication and as the acting head of the Whole Person Education Centre. For teaching, I use English as the medium of instruction for undergraduate courses and Mandarin for postgraduate courses. While I believe that my Chinese identity, along with my proficiency in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese, and my cultural sensitivity, have equipped me to fulfill my roles and are likely key reasons I was entrusted with them—especially in the Greater Bay Area (GBA), where cultural and linguistic diversity is highly valued (Zhou, 2023)—my teaching experiences have not been without challenges.

I do occasionally find myself influenced by certain cultural assumptions and perspectives that shape my interactions with students from mainland China. These biases could subtly impact my engagement, perception or even decision-making within the classroom. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede et al., 2010), China ranks relatively high in power distance, with Chinese students typically demonstrating a high level of respect and deference towards their teachers. As an instructor, I inherently hold a position of authority and influence over my students. Moreover, my positionality as an outsider in the cultural context of mainland China adds another layer to these power dynamics. I am mindful of such unequal power relations and actively strive to foster a more egalitarian learning environment where students feel empowered to voice their opinions freely.

During the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, I was conducting online classes from Malaysia for students who stayed at home with restricted movement in China. Although there was no time zone difference, technical difficulties in virtual teaching and the lack of personal interaction disrupted the flow of lessons and reduced student engagement. In response, my university swiftly established a first ever e-learning taskforce and initiated “train-the-trainer” sessions to gather, analyze, and address feedback from faculty regarding teaching and learning problems. Since many international faculty members were residing or

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