



## Learning to teach again, in China

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Teaching English abroad provides an opportunity to travel the world however, it can also be a challenging endeavor. Having limited exposure to and understanding of the culture adds to the intensity of the challenge and the inability to navigate daily living in a new environment can be a painful disorienting experience that often results in culture shock. Young Yun Kim's (2008) theory outlines a developmental model that presents the trials of cross-cultural adaptation as a dynamic and transformative process through which *intercultural personhood* can be developed. Kim (2008) argues that the stress of acculturation and deculturation is an opportunity for growth manifested in cycles of *stress-adaptation-growth*. This account of a three-year experience living and teaching at a public high school in China applies Kim's (2008) model to demonstrate how the difficulties of cross-cultural experiences can be the catalyst for transformation and development of intercultural identity. Developing an understanding of the cultural context through awareness and reflection facilitates the ability to teach students from other cultures. Educators in Georgia, particularly ESL teachers, are likewise challenged by cultural differences with their students and can further develop their intercultural skills regardless of location.

*Keywords:* education, cultural studies

**When I began my career as a teacher,** I was intentional in my choice to work in a school located in the inner-city neighborhood where I lived. The cultural background of the students, and most of the other teachers, was vastly different

from mine, and my understanding of how to navigate the cultural differences was limited. While my teacher education program familiarized me with multicultural education, I learned that the ability to address the challenges of cross-cultural education is developed gradually through awareness and reflective practices. My efforts to understand the lives of my students through my relationships with them and my colleagues helped me to gain a broader perspective and provide context for instruction, and I began to develop an intercultural competence that facilitated my ability to teach in that environment.

After 11 years of teaching I began to wonder about how I could further pursue my passion for educating adolescents. My love for teaching and commitment to students were still strong but I wanted to extend myself beyond the realm of my collective experiences as a secondary school social studies teacher; I enrolled in a doctoral program planning to build on my teaching experiences and become a teacher educator. When an opportunity to teach in China was extended to students in my graduate school program, it grabbed my attention. The idea of living abroad had always appealed to me; I had traveled to China as a chaperone for a middle school trip and was fascinated by what I had experienced. As a teacher in this university partnership, I could also function as a research assistant for the initiative to prepare Chinese high school students for their educations in the United States. Additionally, I would be able to bring my son and felt that the opportunity for him to learn through the experience would be invaluable.

I was thrilled by the prospect of expanding our life experiences through an immersion in Chinese culture. I had a longstanding desire to develop a deeper understanding of the rest of the world by living abroad. I envisioned being immersed in the culture as a two-year learning experience for my son and me that would afford us a broader, more global perspective on the world. I quickly learned that the excitement of our adventure would be tempered by the difficulties of being a foreigner.

Learning to teach in China felt like my first years as a teacher. When I began my teaching career I had had a basic understanding of pedagogy; but, it was through my experiences in the classroom and an increased understanding of the students' culture that I reconstructed my identity as a teacher. Although I was an experienced teacher and had studied Chinese culture, I found that teaching in my new environment was quite difficult. However, the trials that I encountered were the catalyst for my growth as a teacher and for the development of my intercultural identity.

## **My Experience**

### **Preparations and Assumptions**

The international program is a collaboration between a Chinese public high school, the university, and a private company. There are approximately 3,000 students in the school which is located in China's third largest city, Guangzhou. The university recruited three teachers (Language Arts, Math and Social Studies) who would prepare the students for attending college in the United States. In the program, the students spend two years taking half of their courses from the

American teachers and half of their courses from Chinese teachers on the school's faculty. The goal of the program is to facilitate the Chinese students' transition through an educational experience that provides English language instruction while incorporating student-centered teaching and learning strategies. In preparation for my endeavor, I tried to develop some understanding of the culture, plan for the courses I would teach, and gather things that I thought would ease the transition to my new world. I had never been to Guangzhou, and I lacked substantive experience with the culture, I needed a crash course on living in China. I gathered information to build background knowledge on the culture and tried to anticipate the tangible cultural differences that were ahead of me. The language was the most obvious obstacle to our adjustment, so my son and I took Mandarin lessons; but, while he developed a basic level of proficiency, I acquired only a few words. To understand the context for teaching social studies I read books and articles about the politics and history of education in China. Along with the other teachers, my son and I attended briefings on the history and culture of China. In a university course on intercultural communication I studied scholars of Asian culture and explored my cultural background. I examined my cultural identity in an effort to understand my biases and lay the groundwork for building relationships with my future students and colleagues in China. My work in this course was the beginning of a reflective process that has been an invaluable part of my experience. Using the framework provided in *Intercultural Communication* (Scollon & Scollon, 2001) as a lens for considering my approach to teaching and day-to-day interactions with the local people gave me a perspective that extended beyond intercultural communications taking into account differences in

gender, generation, and sociolinguistic systems. According to Scollon & Scollon (2001), differences in discourse patterns are the primary source of intercultural miscommunication, and because professional communicators are simultaneously, members of multiple discourse groups there are several factors to consider as we interpret inter-group communications.

Throughout my preparations for teaching, I tried to anticipate the learning environment. I thought that my greatest challenge would be coaxing the “reticent” Chinese students to take part in student-centered learning activities. While I tried to resist assigning stereotypical characteristics to my images of my future students, I could not imagine them otherwise, given my view of the highly structured environment of the traditional Chinese education system.

I developed my syllabi for World History and American Culture using the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) and Common Core Standards (CCS) as a framework. To begin, I planned to use the strategies I had employed with my students in Atlanta who were reading below grade level: building background knowledge through vocabulary instruction and the use of visual images, differentiated instruction, and cooperative learning. Having been warned that internet access would be limited (no YouTube!), I packed books and digital resources that I had used in the past. As I considered the content, I was given a list of topics that I could not discuss. It was not particularly difficult to navigate the restrictions because they were explicitly communicated. However, there were times when the appropriateness of course content was extraordinarily hard to discern due to a communication strategy where administrators avoided direct

introduction of their topic. This approach to addressing communication when it is unclear that the listeners will be open to the speaker's conclusion or when the aim of the discourse is to require the listener to take a particular action (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

### **Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

A goal for this cultural exchange has been for the participants to have experiences that facilitate cross-cultural understanding. In his theory of cross-cultural adaptation, Kim (2008) states that identity develops throughout life, and we can learn and change through intercultural communication experiences. He posits that *intercultural personhood* evolves as individuals adapt to living in a new and different culture or subculture. Having extended intercultural experiences challenges individuals as they face others' different ways of thinking, in response their cultural identities can evolve as they move beyond their cultural boundaries and ways of thinking and seek similarities to solve problems.

Kim (2008) further explains that cross-cultural adaptation is the product of the reciprocal relationship between acculturation and deculturation. Acculturation, the acquisition of new cultural practices, is a learning process that requires the active engagement of an individual. Deculturation is the unlearning, if only temporarily, of cultural practices in order to adopt new habits. Experiences of continued acculturation and deculturation are accompanied by stress from the internal conflict that is created by the push and pull between the old and new ways of doing things. For Kim, this stress is "an opportunity to search deep inside ourselves for new possibilities to recreate ourselves (2008, p. 363).

## **Stress-Adaptation-Growth**

My personal experiences and observations of the experiences of the other teachers and students support Kim's (2008) theory that intercultural identity evolves through the adaptation to a new living environment. Kim (2008) illustrates the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic as the product of the conflict between the need for acculturation and the resistance to deculturation. The stress can result in emotional lows (confusion, uncertainty, anxiety) commonly referred to as "culture shock" (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Sahlin's concludes that it is through the desire to overcome difficulties that people learn to adapt to their new circumstances (as cited in Kim, 2008). The growth follows the "successful, long-term, and cumulative management" of the stress and adaptation (Kim, 2008, p. 364).

In retrospect, I can identify many cycles that began when I faced a surprising or unfamiliar situation and experienced the stress of not understanding something or not knowing how to address a problem. There were many difficulties that I did not handle very well initially. However, because of the cyclical nature of the adaptive process I began to learn new ways of operating as I came to understand the local practices. At the same time, I learned to let go of some of my familiar ways of being.

## **Stress**

At first, my excitement about our adventure and new surroundings overshadowed many of the challenges I encountered, but even during that honeymoon period there was evidence of the challenges ahead. After a month or

so, I began to realize the inadequacy of my cultural competence. Many of my expectations about the school and teaching turned out to be off-base; I was unprepared for the complexities of navigating daily life; and intercultural communications were far more complicated than I had expected.

The new experiences of our first weeks were full of excitement and wonder. When the American teachers moved into our apartments in the teacher dormitory a week before school began, the students were already on campus for their mandatory military training. They began training at 7:00 a.m. and practiced marching drills until lunch when they took a two-hour break to eat and rest. After lunch they continued to practice drills until the dinner break, and they practiced again in the evenings until 9:00. From our apartment I could hear their chants and cadences. The training was run by soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and it appeared to be grueling work under the hot sun. The American teachers were invited to meet our new students, and the students and 班主任ban zhuren asked us to participate in a musical performance as part of a show on the last night of the training. For me, the invitation was completely unexpected after observing the formality of the military training, and I was even more surprised when the students chose a Bruno Mars song to perform with us. Some of the students were as shy as I expected them to be. However, several students were quite excited about our performance and participated in the planning and practices enthusiastically.

The evening of the performance was surreal. The stage in the gym was the setting and the gym was dark, the stage lights were bright, and the sound system



was blaring. My senses were overloaded. Having no understanding of the language I was relying on body language to interpret what was happening. During the show the atmosphere and energy in the gym was far different from the militaristic environment that I had observed throughout the week. Most of the classes sang and some danced to popular Chinese songs; the students in the audience clapped and cheered after each performance. I was surprised when two groups presented comedic skits mocking their PLA trainers; however, the students, teachers, and soldiers laughed and applauded. The soldiers gave the final performance of the evening. The synchronicity and beauty of their traditional martial arts routine drew a standing ovation. Standing in the midst of the applauding students, I realized that they had a great deal of respect for their trainers and they had developed a bond during their week together. I began to feel the full weight of the circumstances and it was clear to me then that I was going to encounter many new and unexpected experiences here.

One of the more surprising discoveries was that while the school culture is based on traditional Chinese education, in many ways, the controls on students are far more relaxed than I had expected. For example, each class is assigned to a classroom and the students remain in their classrooms. The daily schedule is quite rigorous with classes being held from 7:30 AM to 5:00 PM each day and an evening study period from 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM. The teachers have offices and go to the classrooms to teach so the students are frequently unsupervised throughout the day and during self-study periods. I also discovered that many of my students did not fit the stereotypical image of Chinese students. I had

imagined that my students in China would be singularly focused on academics, and that they would be compliant and reticent in the classroom. However, some of them were inattentive during class and disinterested in school. Some of the students aspired to careers in medicine and some dreamt of being movie stars and singers, some were perfectionistic and overachieving while others were unorganized and only did the minimum amount of work required on assignments. Adapting to a new school environment and new students was a trying experience that required a great deal of patience at times. There are many things that did not “make sense” from a western perspective and I am not sure if I could have done more to prepare myself for that.

While some of my advance work made some aspects of the transition go more smoothly, navigating the complexities of living in a new culture required me to develop a whole new skill set. As the novelty of being in China began to wear off, the culture shock began. Adjusting to our new living environment was more difficult than I believed it would be and providing for basic needs presented challenges that I was ill-prepared to face, I was completely unprepared for how helpless I would feel. I was expecting to shop at a local market for food and dine frequently at local restaurants. But when we arrived in Guangzhou we found that the location of the campus was relatively isolated and was mostly surrounded by high rise residential buildings that were under construction. One small community was visible from our balconies; the buildings were stained and the road was unpaved and partially flooded. We were warned not to go to that village because of the people living there who “do not like foreigners.” Due to the ongoing

construction, there were no amenities such as shops, restaurants or grocery stores within walking distance of the campus. Without access to a personal vehicle the public transportation system was our connection to the local businesses and the larger commercial sections of the city. Because the metro station is a ten-minute walk from the campus, there were no quick trips to shop for groceries. A one-way trip to the nearest supermarket entailed walking to the bus station and a twenty-minute bus ride. At the supermarket there were more challenges to face. Many of the products were unrecognizable to me and their labels, written in Chinese, were impossible to decipher. We had to make three trips to the supermarket each week because we could only buy as much as we could carry.

There were psychological challenges, too. The phenomenon of being an outsider can be disorienting. Typically, foreigners stand out in contrast to the homogenous population with 91.6% of the citizens being of Han ethnicity (The World Factbook, 2017). My son and I often drew attention in public spaces. My tall, blue-eyed, Chinese speaking son achieved something close to rock star status while we were there. As we rode on the subway, walked down the street, or shopped for groceries people used their cellphones to take photos of us. We were approached directly by people who wanted to have a conversation in English or take “selfies” with us. On several occasions, we were approached by students who had been assigned the task of talking with a native English speaker as their homework. On the other hand, it was surprisingly easy to feel anonymous and isolated in the midst of the crowds of people. The language barrier was an

obvious obstacle and making connections was impossible without enough language to engage with the people around us. The bewildering contrast of being on display to feeling invisible in a densely populated city of over 15 million people was an ongoing source of stress.

The trials of working at the heart of this cross-cultural partnership were often related to communication and the cultural differences were equally perplexing. Language was the most obvious problem for the foreign teachers. While the International Program's content courses were taught in English the primary language of communication is 普通话 *Putonghua* (the common language). All school business (including communication with parents) was conducted in 普通话 *Putonghua*. Thus, we were rarely informed about daily operational issues such as schedule changes, school rules, and procedures.

We could use our translator to communicate with parents and other teachers but it was difficult to be certain that our intended message was being transmitted accurately. For example, at the end of the first semester, the teachers were required to submit written comments on each student which were translated so that the parents could understand them. I wrote that a student was "frequently distracted" which was affecting her performance on some tasks. Shortly after the comments were given to the parents, I received a message from the student. She said that there must have been a mistake in the communication, the translation of the comments gave her parents the impression that she was not coming to my

class. Fortunately, her parents knew her well enough to know that she would not skip class but many difficult situations were not so easily resolved.

## **Adaptation**

After a few weeks of teaching the inaugural group of students, I was approached by the department chair who shared her concern that the students were afraid of me. Taken aback, I candidly shared with her that I did not know how it was possible that I was frightening them. I was perplexed when she said that it was because of my directness; how could I manage my classroom any other way? The Chinese teachers were reportedly stern and strict, I wondered how they could be strict without being direct. I moved on without understanding what my department chair was trying to convey to me. Later, as I reflected on my first term, I realized the distinction between my directness and the directive aspect of the Chinese teachers' instructional practices. As an illustration, my World History students were producing puppet shows on a story of origin. On this project, the students used cultural narratives about how the universe began and how humans came into being to write a script and perform the story using puppets they created. The students were assigned to small working groups and each member had been assigned a specific task. The progress of one group was not advancing at the same pace as the other groups; as I observed the group I saw that only one student, who was assigned the role of "producer", was actively working and the other group members were talking and watching her. I chose that particular student to be the producer because she was very organized and diligent in completing her work. As I stood watching I assumed that efforts of the other group

members were constrained by her perfectionistic standards. I approached the group, with my stern teacher look on my face, and restated my expectation that each member had a role in the group's efforts. Some of the students laughed, then they all sat silently, when I let them know that they all needed to get to work. My stern teacher look had been an effective way of communicating with my students in the United States, so I was surprised and frustrated by their reaction.

As I built relationships with the students and gained exposure to the school culture, I saw the circumstances in a different light. I began to understand why the department chair told me that the students were afraid of me and I realized my missteps in communicating with my students during that activity. The students were not accustomed to the facial expressions of the American teachers. The non-verbal mode of communicating with students using “a look” made the students uncomfortable; the laughter was an expression of anxiety or nervousness about the interaction (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Furthermore, the “producer” was also the 班长 *ban zhang* (class monitor - a leadership position giving her elevated status in the school and with her peers) and my actions were equivalent to what we describe in the U.S. as “calling her out”. In the Chinese classroom, a student loses face if she is criticized publicly by the teacher (Schoenhals, 1993) so my reaction was out of proportion given the situation.

## **Growth**

Through the process of recognizing and reflecting on my cultural missteps I developed a new understanding of Chinese culture and my environment. As my perspectives shifted I became increasingly competent at living in China. The

internal boundaries that shaped my views expanded and softened. As I recognized the shift in my perspective I felt more connected to my environment.

During my first year, I struggled to survive in my new environment. The challenge of how to meet my basic needs exhausted me. Teaching in a new context and accepting my position as a foreign teacher frustrated me. And, the isolation that I experienced caused me to be anxious and frightened at times. At first, I tried to hold on to my cultural identity. I sought out familiar foods at specialty stores and Western restaurants, I made frequent trips to Hong Kong to soak up the Western influences there. I maintained my Western style of communicating directly with my colleagues and students. At the same time, I stubbornly refused to give up my desire to become a part of my new world. The two-hour trip to the supermarket was an ordeal at the end of a long day of work. However, it required me to leave the insular school community and experience the lifestyles of the locals. Each outing was a cultural field trip where I experienced the world in a completely different way and I witnessed the ingenuity and fortitude that is the fabric of daily existence for the people living around us. Bicycles and motor scooters with myriad cargo moved in every direction. Peasants were selling fruit and vegetables from blankets on the sidewalk, a man setting up a stool as a barber's chair to cut hair on the sidewalk of a busy street. Gradually, my curiosity delivered me from ineptitude as I explored the city and traveled to other provinces. I observed people and their ways of life. I recorded my experiences in my journal and with my camera. I reflected on my interactions with my colleagues and students. I established relationships with local people that were open to educating

me about their culture. I struggled with learning the language, fortunately my son learned to speak and read relatively quickly. As he attained a level of fluency that allowed him to communicate with local people I noticed a shift in our interactions with them. Crossing the language barrier made daily transactions simpler and provided a way of connecting to the people around us. We gained acceptance through our increasing familiarity with the community and our improved communication. After our first year, people in the community recognized us and greeted warmly when they saw us.

My perspective on my work with the students also shifted. I had come to China expecting to use the same curricula and many of the same student-centered strategies that I would typically use with my American students. While I was able to recognize my bias through efforts to prepare for intercultural teaching and learning, I did not fully develop intercultural competence until I had lived through and reflected critically on my experiences. Eventually, I grew to understand that preparing my students for college was not about teaching them with Western teaching strategies. I had to develop practices that incorporated those strategies in ways that were meaningful and beneficial to the students; in order to learn how to teach them I had to develop an understanding of the cultural context.

Having limited exposure to and understanding of the culture before going to China added a layer of difficulty to the trials of navigating daily living. I found that adjusting to a new culture can be a disorienting and stressful experience. After two years of learning how to navigate my new world I gained a new-found



perspective; in my third year I was able to take more time to reflect on how my experiences impacted me. Without question, I have been transformed. I am certainly stronger and my experiences have taught me more about Chinese culture than I could have learned by reading books, but the most substantial shift has been the opening of the internal boundaries that shaped my identity. Because of my growth the divisions that once existed between myself and people with different cultural backgrounds no longer dominate my experiences. Now, it is easier to see the world in terms of commonalities amongst people and appreciate different perspectives.

### **Applications to Georgia**

In order to educate our students our knowledge of them must extend beyond the classroom into their lives and cultures (Freire, 1998). As teachers of English language learners, we face many obstacles that stem from cultural differences and we must learn to navigate cultural barriers to establish relationships with our students. Haddix and Price-Dennis assert that, “students are less likely to resist teachers when pedagogies are congruent with the cultural and linguistic identities of their communities” (2013, p. 250). We can become more effective intercultural educators by extending our education beyond coursework to include experiences that familiarize us with the cultures of our students.

“One does not need to leave home to experience acculturation” (Kim, 2008). The school where I began my teaching career was literally two blocks from my home but the cultural differences between my students and me were significant obstacles

as I learned to teach. The first two years were quite stressful as I learned to adapt to my new environment. I found that I had to be intentional about gaining understanding of the lives of my students, and I learned the importance of spending time in their communities. These experiences changed my perspective and enabled me to connect with my students in the classroom; they were growth experiences that transformed me as a person and informed my teaching practices.

In 2008, GATESOL in Action published an article on the work of teachers in an ESOL endorsement program in Georgia. The analysis of the Funds of Knowledge family literacy work provides detailed insight to the effects of working with refugee families in their homes. The teacher's reflections illustrate how developing relationships with the families transformed their perspectives and shaped their teaching philosophies (Tinker Sachs et al., 2008). These statements, made by the teachers in this study, demonstrate the influence of their connections with the students' culture on their teaching:

Establishing relationships with the families is not only beneficial for the teacher, but also for the school. There is and always will be a connection between school and home. Building rapport and relationships of trust in both scenarios benefits not only you as a teacher, but also your students and their families; therefore, the social processes of teaching and learning can only be improved (p. 7).

As I make my visits, I am a teacher and a learner, an insider and outsider. Only by experiencing the same living conditions and constraints of these families can a teacher truly understand the daily struggles faced by our students and their families. In this learning process, I hope to be able to transfer what I learned to the classroom, as a teacher who does not perceive my students with prejudiced social and cultural perspectives, but one who is empathetic, resourceful and truly effective (p. 15).

## **Conclusion**

We develop our intercultural competence when we seek to understand the cultural differences we experience in our daily lives. Kim (2008) asserts that a broader application of his theory of intercultural personhood is relevant in the context of the increasing intercultural exchange that accompanies globalization. The opportunities for developing an understanding of other cultures and our ability to communicate across cultural and physical boundaries are growing. In addition to experiential learning, mass media and technological innovation are avenues that expose us to cultures that are different from ours. Whether we are in or outside of the classroom, technological innovations and social media provide opportunities for learning from each other. Through these tools we can acquire new cultural information to support our efforts to become more effective intercultural educators.

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