

Experiences Teaching Norwegian Engineering Students from a Taiwanese Perspective*

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This paper presents the experiences and observations of a Taiwanese scholar teaching engineering students in Norway for one semester. Many important cultural differences were found both in terms of student behaviour and academic practices. This qualitative study focuses in particular on the teacher's formal meeting with the students in the classroom, informal meetings with the students outside the classroom and examination practices. The observations presented here can give Eastern educators a better insight into the current educational situation in Northern Europe. Moreover, the observations can also be useful to North European educators as an observer's view of current educational practices.

Keywords: internationalization; culture differences; testing; classroom teaching

1. Introduction

This paper is a response to 'Experiences of Teaching Taiwanese engineering students from a Western perspective' that appeared in the *International Journal of Engineering Education* [1], which gave an account of a Western teacher's experiences of teaching in Taiwan. Since its publication, the paper generated several interesting threads of discussions on 'the mystery of the Taiwanese student' [2]. It follows a string of Western accounts of teaching Chinese heritage students in the Orient [3–9], teaching Chinese heritage students in Western countries [10, 11], as well as a host of studies contrasting students from multiple cultures [12–17]. In this paper the tables are turned as less is written about a Taiwanese teacher's perspectives on the Western students. The author is a native Taiwanese with Western university education and more than 10 years of teaching experience in Taiwanese universities, including the teaching of the English language to a broad range of students in disciplines ranging from humanities to engineering. During the spring of 2010 the author had the opportunity of teaching English to a class of computing students in Oslo University College. With the Taiwanese teaching practices fresh in her mind, this gave rise to a number of interesting observations that are contrasted here.

The experiences presented in this paper can be useful to both Eastern and Western educators. Internationalization is high on the agenda and many Taiwanese teachers encourage their students to go abroad and thus prepare their students through advice. Many Taiwanese educators obtained their education partially or fully in Western universities. However, for some of the more senior

teachers much may have changed since they themselves were students. Undeniably, the educational culture among students has changed in recent years throughout the world. Moreover, there is also a great diversity between Western universities. For example, a student in the US does not obtain much insight into what it is like to be a student in a European university and vice versa. Taiwanese students studying in the West will benefit from updated and good advice.

For the Western educator the observations presented here can give an insight into how well their educational systems are aligned internationally as there are global initiatives to standardize engineering education. The observations presented here may give guidance as to which practices promote effective learning and which practices should be reconsidered.

1.1 Setting

The observer in this study is a Taiwanese national who has been teaching in Taiwan for the last decade, mostly at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan, Taiwan, which can be classified as a research university with a focus on engineering and technology. The author thus has first-hand experience and knowledge of the Taiwanese higher education system and its students. Moreover, the author received both her graduate and postgraduate university education in the UK and is thus accustomed to Western culture and Western higher education.

During the spring of 2010 the author was invited to spend a semester at the Faculty of Engineering in Oslo University College, Norway. Oslo University College is the fourth largest national educational institution focusing on professional undergraduate

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studies, but it also has a number of Master and Ph.D. programmes. The faculty of engineering, located in the heart of the capital Oslo, is the third largest faculty with some 1500 engineering students and 100 faculty members.

The author was asked to teach a course entitled 'English communication' to several classes of first year students, totalling 86 'applied computing' majors. Most students were non-immigrant Norwegian and about 25% of the students had immigrant background (1st or 2nd generation), mostly from the Middle East or central Asia regions. The course took place in the 2nd semester of the first year. All students would have acquired the Higher Education Entrance Qualification prior to their bachelor studies.

It is important for engineers to master English and the obligatory course 'English Communication' focuses on improving learners' English abilities in written and oral communication. The recommended textbook was a comprehensive English language book authored by a Norwegian lecturer [18]. As there was little time between when the opportunity opened up and when the semester started, the author did not have sufficient time to investigate alternative textbooks; the author thus decided to stick with the default book.

Initially, the teacher was advised by one Norwegian professor to be vigilant and neutral when dealing with the Norwegian students as this professor thought that Norwegian students would not respond well to the strongly authoritative approach that is more common in large power distance societies such as Taiwan. This advice may have helped to contribute to the generally constructive and pleasant tone of communication between the students and the teacher.

2. Related work

Some accounts exist of Western teachers' teaching experiences in Eastern countries [1, 19–22], but comparatively little is written about Easterners' teaching experiences in the West. This is an enigma as a large number of Taiwanese scholars, in particular, have emigrated and taken faculty positions in the West, especially in the United States [23]. This study therefore attempts to contribute towards filling this gap.

Of some relevance to this study is the study of the Chinese language teachers' attitude to Western language teaching strategies [24], which revealed that Chinese teachers often consider that the teaching of communicative skills, which is common in Western countries, has a lower status than the teaching of analytical skills.

One goal of the student and teacher exchange is to

strengthen their understanding of other cultures, and it may be natural to assume that the amount of difficulty faced is related to the distance travelled and difference in culture. However, an interesting study by Selmer and Shiu [25] suggests quite the contrary, namely that it may be more difficult for Hong Kong business people to be placed in a country of a similar culture (PRC) than a country with a totally different culture.

Several student-centric cross-cultural studies exist, for instance a comparison of the Taiwanese and Australian classrooms [26], a comparison of the classrooms in Taiwan and United States [27] and others [10, 11]. Moreover, there has been much interest on the Chinese learner in Western literature [3–6, 28–30]. Comparatively less is written in Western literature about the Western classroom viewed from an Eastern perspective.

3. The Norwegian classroom

The Norwegian students showed some considerable differences in their learning attitudes, compared with those of Taiwanese students. Overall, Eastern students tend to be less direct when interacting with their teachers, as a way of showing a carefulness that demonstrates a respect for authority. Norwegian students were informal when interacting with the teacher and fellow students, both in person and via e-mail. For example, in the classes the students took the initiative more frequently compared with students in Taiwan, and the Norwegian students were more forthcoming in participating in in-class discussion. Outside class the Norwegian students were generally more direct when addressing the teacher by concisely making a request or giving their opinion if they were dissatisfied, while the Taiwanese students are typically more tactful and indirect. These observations are consistent with Hofstede and Hofstede's summary of the norms for small power distance societies including Norway as 'Teachers expect initiative from students in class' and 'Students treat teachers as equals', and the norm for large power distance societies including Taiwan as 'Teachers should take all initiative in class' and 'Students give teachers respect, even outside of class' [31, p. 57]. Other related differences that were observed will be exemplified and elaborated upon throughout this paper.

Discussions with Norwegian students revealed that many view an academic degree as a necessary training to obtain, and carry out, a particular profession, and it is not necessarily the pinnacle of one's life, whereas Taiwanese students tend to view an academic degree as the basis for all in life. The phrase 'All other professions are low, only to study is high' from the North Song Dynasty poem 'Prod-

Table 1. Key differences between Taiwanese and Norwegian engineering students and related practices in the two cultures as observed by the author

	Norway	Taiwan
Students toward teacher	Demanding Negotiating Not afraid of reporting failure Confident and relaxed	Respectful Accepting Failure is no option Humble and careful
Syllabus	Fixed and transparent (contract)	Dynamic and vague (guideline)
Attendance	Optional (low)	Mandatory (high)
Respect for learner differences	Individual adaptations	Uniform treatment
Financing	Personal, state loan	Family
Admittance	Open	Competition (entrance exam)
Grading process	Transparent	Non-transparent (Vague)
Exams	Long (3–5 hours) Anonymous	Short (1–2 hours) Students' identity known within university course exams, anonymous for entrance exams
	Few (in numbers)	Many (in numbers)
	Examination office administrated	Teacher-administrated within school level, state-administered at national level
	Justification of grade given Re-sit possible Reassessment possible	No justification of grade Re-sit not practised Reassessment rare

igy' by the famous scholar Wang Su is well known to most people in Confucian Heritage Societies. Hofstede and Hofstede [31] describe 'inequalities among people are expected and desired' as the general norm for schools in large power distance societies such as Taiwan, and similarly that 'Inequalities among people should be minimized' is the general norm for small power distance societies such as Norway.

The differences discussed in subsequent sections are summarized in Table 1.

3.1 Language proficiency

Norwegian students have a reputation for good English proficiency, deemed among the best in Europe, which in turn surpasses countries of other continents where English is used as a second language. According to the official TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), English proficiency scores for 2007 [32] show that the mean total in Norway is 94, while the mean score in Taiwan is 72.

Experiences during class interaction were consistent with the TOEFL statistics, as the teacher found that the Norwegian students in general have better oral proficiency than Taiwanese students, although there are large individual differences. Further, there were few difficulties in comprehension, indicating that in general Norwegian students also have good listening comprehension. English writing was probably the least developed skill among the Norwegian students. As the teacher's familiarity with the students grew, the diversity in the learners' proficiency levels became more apparent.

3.2 Course descriptions

One of the initial differences between educational practices in Norway and Taiwan that one will notice as a teacher is the different ways that course descriptions, or syllabuses, are handled. In Norway the course description is an absolute document serving as a contract between the student and the teacher. It is sometimes prepared by someone other than the teacher who will run the module. Often, the course description is prepared more than a year ahead of a course and it has to pass rigorous quality checks at department and faculty levels and, in some instances, at institutional level. A course description cannot be altered once the semester has started.

In Taiwan, the teacher is responsible for creating the course descriptions and the initial version is more of an approximate guideline than a precise specification. The teacher is thus free to amend the course description during the course. The practice in Taiwan is consistent with that of an uncertainty-avoiding culture where one prefers to be vague, compared with Norway which is an uncertainty-embracing culture where one is direct [31]. A vague description will avoid people losing face over not satisfying a requirement and thus avoid uncertainty.

However, the global trend in international education points towards the introduction of standardized, specific and transparent course descriptions, such as the national qualification frameworks [33]. It will be interesting to see if Taiwan will take steps to align with these international trends.

3.3 Student behaviour

Student behaviour in the Western classroom has typically been described as being active, lively and dynamic, enabling a stronger student–teacher interaction, which is often realized in-class discussions [1, 9, 21]. Observations revealed that this is to some extent true in Norway. Naturally, the type of activities implemented in class may contribute to specific student behaviour. Other factors are the personality traits of the learners, irrespective of culture. In any sizeable class there will be some active students and some passive students, with the majority of students somewhere in between. Some students showed more enthusiasm and motivation than others. Language proficiency in English may also be a factor as more proficient students tend to be more willing to participate. That is not to say that all proficient learners are confident in participating in in-class activities. A few proficient students were unwilling to act their part in full. It later turned out that one student struggled with shyness and was thus unable to perform in front of the class. This became apparent during one in-class activity where the student was asked to make a comment but was unable to comply. Once the class became preoccupied with the next piece of teamwork, the student approached the teacher to present her problem more privately. Another student consulted the teacher after class and requested that the teacher should never ask her to answer questions in class. Again, her reason was an anxiety of speaking in public and she stated that she would stop attending class if the practice continued. From a Taiwanese viewpoint, such a request and demand is unacceptable. A Taiwanese student may find it impolite to take the initiative to speak up, but to speak up on request is quite appropriate.

3.4 Attitude and academic achievement

No systematic measurement of the students' attitude was attempted. However, the students' behaviour, described in the previous section, conveys their attitudes. The attitudes are strongly connected to student motivation, which is viewed by several scholars as being related to the individualism–collectivism dimension of the culture. Students with intrinsic motivation, such as a personal interest in mathematics, score higher than students with an extrinsic interest, that is, family-oriented motivation [5, 14, 34, 35].

Moreover, the type of course is likely to have an impact on a student's attitude. Students who have decided to study computer science are perhaps less motivated to put an effort into other non-computer-related topics such as English. A teacher teaching a course that is more central to the curriculum may have experienced more enthusiasm from the stu-

dents. In fact, the author usually teaches students who have chosen English as their major subject, and thereby is used to students who are more motivated to study English.

3.5 Learner differences and special needs

It was observed that the Norwegian education system allows for certain concessions to be made for students with special needs such as learning difficulties. For example, one student told the teacher that she is dyslexic and therefore needs more time to prepare for exams and thus needs to know the date of the exam earlier. The same student also expected the teacher to allow her more time to complete certain in-class tasks. Dyslexic students and students with other special needs are either allowed extra time in the exams or special aids such as computers. The flexible attitude towards individual needs may be attributed to both individualism and femininity, which are both characteristics of the Norwegian society [31, 36], while the Taiwanese society is characterized as being collectivist and masculine and there is not much leeway to accommodate a student's special needs. Feminine attributes include helping others, while masculine attributes include competition [31].

The acceptance of individual learning differences also manifested itself more generally. Some students, when unable to complete tasks in class, found no problem in informing the teacher that they have not got that far yet and so cannot answer certain questions. In general, the Norwegian students appeared much more relaxed and confident in the classroom, even when unable to answer questions. This is in strong contrast to the Taiwanese Confucius-heritage classrooms where students have been taught from a young age, or are expected, to be 'humble' in order to learn.

3.6 Attendance

Class attendance at university level is usually not compulsory in Norway, unlike in Taiwan where students often have to demonstrate an attendance of more than 80% to pass a course. It is the author's assertion that Taiwanese educators generally view low attendance as reflecting a bad learning habit and low attendance thus affects students' grades. The pros and cons of mandatory attendance have been debated in the literature for many years [37–40].

Freedom of attendance appears to be a trait of tailoring to the needs of individual learners. Also pedagogical strategies such as problem-based learning (PBL) places less emphasis on attendance [41], although it has been claimed that PBL has the characteristics of an ancient Chinese teaching philosophy [42]. Some Norwegian educators claim that some students learn better outside of university and

should thus be allowed to adopt a learning environment to maximize the learning effectiveness. Student associations are also strong in Norway and they have for many years lobbied for freedom of attendance. There is clearly a tension between students and pedagogy experts on one side and the teachers on the other, as several of the Norwegian engineering teachers expressed their frustration over the liberal system of free attendance.

The number of students attending a class varied greatly. Attendance is one important factor affecting the classroom atmosphere. If too few students turn up, the activities that the teacher has prepared may not be as effective, and it subsequently may affect the motivation of those who do attend the class. However, a smaller class may in fact be preferred by some students as it is more intimate and it is more relaxing to discuss and interact with the teacher.

Observably, in a Norwegian classroom, the participation of the learners varies greatly according to the type of students present, their level of language proficiency, and other personal circumstances. An interesting observation was that some students used their freedom to escape during breaks after learning that they would be asked to perform some task individually in class. When asked, students will often admit that they do not have time to attend class as they have to go to work. Note that these are full time students who receive full state funding. Shifts in trends due to students' part time work and the effects on attendance have been discussed in the literature [43].

In particular, attendance was particularly low during exam time or on occasions when students had assignment deadlines in other courses. Clearly, from a teacher's perspective, it is more practical if attendance is compulsory; whereas, from a learner's point of view, the flexibility of voluntary attendance may seem more convenient as the students have the complete freedom to organize their own lives. Obviously, the student who is absent will also miss out on the learning opportunities that naturally present themselves in the classroom. Further, students' absences may also result in more work for the teacher, as information announced in class may have to be repeated outside of class to individuals who were absent.

The Norwegian system seems to allow much greater freedom and students have more rights, compared with students in Taiwan. It will be interesting to observe the overall long-term effects of the two approaches over the coming decades.

3.7 Coursework and learning versus grades

The students' freedom to not attend class also seemingly contributes to a competitive pull between

learning and grades. Some Norwegian teachers impose compulsory but ungraded assignments, as a way of determining whether students should be allowed to sit the final exam; this often also determines the final grade in a course. Written feedback on the assignments is usually returned to the students, allowing them to clarify and correct potential misunderstandings and to let them know how well they are doing.

The author decided to try this pedagogical strategy inspired by the previous year's assignments. Although most students submitted the coursework, only about half of the students picked up their feedback. The other half did not even pick up their feedback after being notified two or three times. This suggests that half of the students were not interested in knowing how well they had done and were thus unwilling to use the chance to improve themselves through the available feedback. The ungraded obligatory assignments do not seem to stimulate and motivate the weaker and less motivated students to put in the necessary hard work to learn. In Taiwan, coursework usually counts towards the final grade and students are therefore forced to put in hard work on their assignment in order to obtain a decent grade.

It may appear that grades are generally more important than learning to the Norwegian students. If attending class and obtaining feedback on assignments are not required for passing courses, there may be less focus on the learning process and more focus on the resulting grades. Teacher feedback may be viewed as unnecessary by some students who will postpone the problem of passing the exam until later. In fact, some of the students who rarely attended class exhibited symptoms of a panic attack a few days prior to the exam by asking curriculum-related questions outside of class. This could be caused by a cultured lack of study technique. Norwegian education has witnessed an increased educational liberation over the past decades with more focus on individual learning and less focus on academic achievement. In Taiwan, the main focus is on academic achievement and competition.

A noticeable difference between the coursework practices in Norway and those in Taiwan is that it is expected that the weekend is set aside for leisure and relaxation in Norway. Consequently, the author was recommended to schedule assignment deadlines to Fridays, instead of Mondays, so that the weekend would not be spoiled by having to do coursework. Such concerns are uncommon in Taiwan.

4. Outside class encounters

Students who did not regularly attend class tended to ask more questions outside of class, in particular

using e-mail. Approaches varied greatly as some students were more tactful than others. In general, students were not afraid to speak up or ask questions, in contrast to students in Taiwan. This more direct confrontation with the teacher is also a sign of the low power distance in Norway, compared with the large power distance in Taiwan where students are taught from an early age to respect their teachers [31]. Some students presented an excuse as to why they were asking a question before they asked the actual question, some typical reasons being that they were unable to attend class due to sickness, job commitments, family incidences, living distance, or even that they were going on holiday. The tone of the requests varied from the less to the more abrupt. Clearly, the abruptness can in some instance be attributed to some students' lack of language proficiency. However, abruptness can also be linked to culture as some cultures are more direct and others more indirect [31].

4.1 *E-meeting place*

Fronter is the most widely used learning management system in Norway for assisting teachers and students in managing courses [44]. Students are often familiar with Fronter from high school and Teachers are therefore advised to use Fronter as it serves as a standard student-teacher communication tool. It is linked to a database of enrolled students and can help teachers to manage student submissions and grades. Moreover, the web-based interface makes evident who has submitted coursework, when the coursework was submitted and what the coursework is. Arguments about whether late submissions were handed in on time are therefore avoided.

However, it turned out that not all students were effective Fronter users. For instance, one student claimed at the end of the semester that he had submitted the work online into 'my portfolio', which is the student's personal folder, before the deadline and could not understand why it had not been registered by the teacher. Clearly, the student had misunderstood the concept of folder scopes and ownership as revealed by the following explanation:

I submitted the first assignment ages ago, but i checked now and i can't find it on my portfolio page. I have no idea what may have happened but i assure you i did this assignment before the deadline months ago and i was 100% sure i submitted it on the day of the deadline.

Several students submitted work late, and sent the coursework via e-mail after the submission folder had automatically closed. Another student submitted his late coursework into the main resource site where the teacher posts lecture notes to the students, because the submission folder was closed.

Moreover, he posted a note explaining that this action was due to the fact that he could not find the teacher's e-mail address. Consequently, the student exposed his work to all of his classmates who could also see that he had a late submission.

Although most students used the e-learning system successfully, the few special cases caused a lot of extra work for the teacher. In Taiwan, learning management systems are less commonly used. Student-teacher communication outside class occurs in person or via e-mail. However, students often communicate electronically between themselves via BBS (Bulletin Board Service), which is no longer much used by students in Europe.

4.2 *Negotiations*

A noticeable pattern was that students tended to negotiate with the teacher just before and after the deadline of assignments and a few days prior to the exam as exemplified by the following e-mail message:

How can you write me off this semester's exam without consulting me first? I came down with a cold this week and because I live some distance from campus I decided not to attend. Is there no way to get a second chance?

The types and styles of student negotiation included requesting extensions, change of presentation schedule, seeking second chances for an assignment or oral presentation, reschedule a no-show presentation, pleading for presenting without the class present, requesting a concession to submit longer written assignments than the maximum allowable length, requesting oral presentation waivers, requesting not to be challenged in class, etc. Most of the negotiations were conducted via e-mail by those who rarely, or never, attended class. Some students would make initial requests via e-mail, and then later follow up the request by turning up in class. In most instances, these were among the few times these students appeared in person.

Negotiations between students and teachers are rare in Taiwan. Negotiations are usually performed between people at the same level in the hierarchy, while the power distance between students and teachers means that students have to be submissive to the teachers' guidance.

4.3 *Manners and etiquette*

Negotiations can reveal students' manners and etiquette. A majority of the students were neutral, neither polite nor impolite. A few individuals were more outspoken, expressing their opinions or requests more directly, yet some were more careful and polite than others within this group. A few students were visibly polite, greeting the teacher verbally or by hand gesture. A few students behaved

more abruptly, mostly realized as spoken requests in class. The abruptness was most visible in the e-mail correspondence—especially when asking questions. This is possibly due to language or cultural barriers; naturally, personal attributes or cultural influences among students with immigrant backgrounds may also be a factor. Overall, the Norwegian students tended to be informal, acting freely and relaxed. The lack of formality can be explained from the perspective of low power distance in society [31] as the student and the teacher are on a more equal footing than in Taiwan. Moreover, the neutral behaviour can be explained as an attribute of a feminine society along a feminine–masculine dimension [31], as students make few attempts at gaining a competitive advantage by impressing the teacher.

In contrast, Taiwanese society is culturally more homogenous than Norway's. Taiwanese society follows well-defined rules for how to behave in various situations and respects those higher in the power hierarchy based on Confucian teachings. Taiwanese students' behaviour is usually polite, consistent and predictable, but one may never know if a friendly gesture is genuine or mechanically produced.

5. Examinations

The teacher observed that Norwegian exams are generally regarded as very important and are implemented carefully with the overall objective of fairness to the students. However, the examination system is costly, in fact, so costly that the Rector of the University has requested that the number of written exams be reduced. Many teachers are frustrated with the bureaucratic examination systems as these are inflexible—especially for teachers who wish to experiment with alternative forms of student evaluations.

In contrast, Taiwanese evaluation systems have various types of exams (monthly exams, in-semester exams, entrance exams, national exams, etc.) and it is the author's assertion that the costs and degrees of fairness vary accordingly. Contrary to what one might expect in a red-tape society such as Taiwan, the bureaucracy associated with exams is surprisingly small. Teachers are usually responsible for fully administering and executing their own exams. The cost of exam guards and administrators is reduced and the teacher is given more control over the exam process. Moreover, exam times are shorter as the maximum duration of an exam is two hours. Note that academic competence exams, national exams and entrance exams in Taiwan are handled more formally, similar to the way regular exams are handled in Norway.

5.1 Preparations

About three weeks prior to the exam, the teacher was asked to return a list of students who were allowed to take the exam by crossing out the names of those who were not allowed, i.e., students who had not completed a set of obligatory assignments. This was not as straightforward as it might seem. In Norway, students are allowed to retake an exam up to three times without having to take the course again. Some students use this opportunity to improve their grades even though they passed the exam the first time around. One problem was that these students were not on the list of students who had completed the assignments successfully for the current year. Consequently, it was very difficult to distinguish between those students who had already satisfied the requirements in previous years and those who had not satisfied the requirements in the current year. Clearly, knowledge about previous students is less of a problem when the same teacher is responsible for the same module across several years.

An exam comprising multiple-choice questions and a short writing task was designed because of the large number of students, although an essay-based exam may have been pedagogically more suitable [45]. The teacher had been informed through a formal faculty memorandum and personally by the head of studies that the exam time was to be three hours—previously the default exam time was five hours. Two weeks prior to the exam the teacher was asked to hand in the completed questions to be used in the exam. This exam had to be formally approved by another teacher and the head of studies.

5.2 Execution

On the day of the examination, the teacher was advised to be available, either in the office or via mobile phone in case questions were raised by students sitting the exam. Unexpectedly, about 70 minutes into the exam, a call was received from the examination office with a request to go to the exam venue to answer questions. The student who had raised the question wondered about how the answers should be written, that is, for a multiple choice question, whether full sentences should be written down or just the letter indicating the selection. Note that the exam questions clearly stated that 'only write down the letter (A, B, C or D) for your answer'. While present in the examination hall a few other students took the opportunity to ask a couple of clarifying questions.

It may seem a contradiction that when every effort is taken to remove bias during grading the students are allowed to talk to the teacher during the exam as information is exchanged during the conversation. First, the teacher may be able to later

identify that a particular answer is provided by a particular student. Moreover, some students may have an advantage over other students as they may have acquired more information from the teacher during the conversation.

The teacher then also realized that the exam time had been changed from three hours to five hours. This unauthorized alteration had been done in handwriting on the front page of the exam paper, which has a standardized table with information about the exam and the signatures of approval. One may speculate whether the long exam time combined with few questions may have prompted some students to think that they should copy down the whole sentences verbatim, including the answer.

The examination was well monitored and well staffed, with about two or three exam guards in the front of the room, one guard at the back and one guard at the side. The exam papers completed by the students were then manually checked by one guard and were ready to be picked up by the teacher within the next few days. The students' identities were hidden from the teacher as the exam papers were labelled with an anonymous number, with the purpose of ensuring unbiased marking. Overall, the Norwegian exam system has an established procedure, with the teacher focusing on creating the exam questions and not having to worry about the execution of the exam. Such an evaluation system appears fair as the students are shielded from teachers during and after the exam and most importantly protected from the teacher's personal feelings and negative or positive bias towards certain students. However, this approach is expensive.

5.3 Aids

In Norway, students are commonly allowed to use various aids, including dictionaries, calculators, notes and even textbooks, with the intention of simulating realistic professional situations. The author experienced that aids in exams is a topic of frequent discussion. On one side, teachers generally want there to be as few aids as possible as it makes the exam easier to make, while students and administration argue for aids. At least in English language exams, the permission to use dictionaries may be more unfair than fair as it narrows the measurable gap between students who have learned and those who haven't, since many dictionaries contain plenty of examples of word usage and sample sentences with correct grammatical points. In the worst case, weak learners may be able to pass exams with the assistance of dictionaries or notes, without actually learning and advancing their language ability, hence also reducing their drive to work hard. Further, several voices are also critical of the use of bilingual

dictionaries as opposed to monolingual dictionaries [46, 47].

In contrast, in Taiwan students are generally very accustomed to sitting exams and adhere to common rules. Aids are usually not permitted except those provided in the exam questions such as mathematical formulae or tables.

5.4 Grading schemes

Grading schemes in the two countries are quite different. Norway has, as part of the Bologna process, adopted a letter scale from A to F, where C represents the average. In Taiwan, a percentage scale is used where 60% is the pass limit for undergraduate students and 70% for graduate students. What actually the various percentages mean is unclear; this is consistent with the vague, uncertainty-avoiding society.

In addition to a relatively well defined grading system, the Norwegian grading process is also relatively transparent. Students are allowed to ask for justifications of the grade and teachers are therefore careful to account for how they arrived at a particular grade. However, vagueness and bias is hard to avoid—especially in borderline cases. In Taiwan, the grading is a more vague and non-transparent process. Students are generally not allowed insight, and generally do not request insight. A request for insight would be observed as rude and even threatening to the Confucian Heritage Teacher. According to power distance, a student cannot question the work of a teacher, especially when it comes to grading.

5.5 Co-grading

Although expensive, the use of external examiners for co-grading is a practice that is believed to both help achieve fairness, and help national, and even international, academic alignment. All educational institutions in Norway must have a quality assurance system as do the rest of the Scandinavian countries [48] and Taiwan [49, 50], and part of this system is the use of external examiners in some form. At the faculty of Engineering, the practice is to cyclically use external examiners for a course every three years, where the exam papers are both marked by the teachers and the examiners who later confer their results. Such co-grading of exam papers does enhance the objectiveness of the examination papers since the final grades have to be agreed upon by both the internal and external examiners.

With the exception of master and Ph.D. dissertation examinations, the co-grading of student exam papers is generally not practised at university level in Taiwan.

5.6 Reassessment

Students also have the right to complain about the grades; in this event the paper will be sent to two external examiners. In such cases, the teacher does not get involved in the process. Theoretically, a student could potentially have up to three exam opportunities per course, and after each exam he or she is also given an opportunity to ask for reassessment, giving a total of six opportunities to settle the final grade. Such a grading system gives students plenty of leeway to maximize their grades. In all fairness, only a small minority of weaker students made use of these mechanisms. The majority of students only took the exam once and did not request reassessment.

As students in Taiwan have to endure a large number of exams prior to university, it is the author's impression that many students may have become fatigued and are not too eager to argue about their course grades and, in keeping with their conduct of respecting teachers, in practice do not do so.

5.7 Re-sits

One consequence of the re-sit policy is that a teacher has to create two examination papers even before it is known whether there will be a second exam or not. This regime, which is specific to this institution but not a general rule in Norway, has caused some dismay among teachers as creating two sets of exam questions requires time, hard work and inspiration. It is understandably not motivating to know that there is a chance that the second exam may not be used. According to current practice, if a student fails an exam and signs up to re-sit, all other students may also request that they re-sit. Moreover, allowing both those who failed and all those who want to improve their grades to take the exam again, means that the grading burden upon the teacher is high in certain subjects, such as mathematics. In addition, a student who fails or is not satisfied with the re-sits grade can again request a reassessment.

Re-sits are not practised in Taiwan. Students who failed an exam will have to re-take the whole course and pass a separate exam for that course in order to gain the credit for the course. Students who provide exceptional justifications such as a car accident, health issues or a death in the family, etc., may be allowed to sit a compensatory exam, since students have not been able to take the original exam with the class due to an unforeseeable event. However, the teacher is expected to deal with such cases with caution and authority.

6. Limitations of this study

The observations presented here are based on a limited sample. It is likely that one may find variations between institutions and student groups across Norway and Taiwan that deviate from those described here. Despite variations, the findings are likely to signal some general trends. The famous writer on cultural difference, Hofstede, writes that differences in cultural studies represent groups and not individuals as the characteristics of an individual can deviate greatly from that of that individual's cultural group [31].

As mentioned in Section 2.4, the type of course taken is likely to have had an impact on a student's attitude. A good proportion of computer students are perhaps less motivated to study non-computer-related topics such as English. Therefore, had the course been different then so might the results.

Another source of variation is the teacher and the teacher's approach. The strategies employed by the teacher as well as the teacher's personality have a strong effect on the in-class atmosphere and student-teacher communication.

In the account of a visiting professor's experiences in Taiwan [1] the visiting professor perceived that he was treated differently from local professors. This was probably not the case in this instance. First, the Norwegian society is composed of individuals with many nationalities, while the Taiwanese society is comparatively more homogenous. Thus, Norwegian students are probably more exposed to foreigners. Second, interaction in English is a natural part of an English course while, for the study reported in [1], English was used to teach a technical subject, and hence language became another factor that could contribute to the different treatment.

7. Conclusions

The experiences of a Confucian Heritage Teacher teaching Western engineering students have been described. Attendance policies and values are very different in the two systems. Taiwanese students are expected to be present in class and attendance is reflected in the grades, while Norwegian students may choose to attend as they will. The unpredictable number of students in class caused by freedom of attendance makes it more difficult to plan good in-class activities, and can ultimately limit the learning effects among those who have actually turned up for class. Moreover, there was a noticeable difference in how students interact in the two systems, where the Norwegian students are comparatively more direct. Generally, the anonymous assessment and well-defined grading policy of the Norwegian examination system appeared fairer than that of Taiwan,

leaving out personal or emotional bias. However, students get several opportunities to pass courses. Further, students even have several opportunities to improve their grades if they so wish. One wonders whether this contributes to the overall fairness, especially to those who do not make use of these opportunities, and whether multiple re-taking of exams reduces fairness and adds costs to the society. The chances of succeeding also appear comparatively greater for Norwegian learners with special needs as efforts are made to close potential gaps caused by reduced functioning. The Taiwanese normal education has not yet seen or realized such needs, as students are treated equally despite learner differences.

Based on the author's experiences in Oslo, the following advice is provided to other Confucian Heritage Teachers who may want to teach Western students. Students should be met with neutrality and one should not expect special treatment because one is a teacher. Direct confrontations by students are not a sign of lack of respect and one should not be insulted by being addressed informally. Student attempts at direct negotiations could be met with the same tact and vagueness as one would in a Confucian environment. Important exceptions to this include the provision of information about the curriculum, assignments and exams, grading schemes and all other practical issues.

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