Culture in an English-language Training Program

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The received notion of culture as a monolithic national identity has in recent decades given way to a new conceptualization. Culture is increasingly viewed as dynamic and multidimensional. Culture can include national or ethnic, but also disciplinary or professional, institutional, consumer, technological, and individual dimensions. This new understanding of culture plays a role in analysis of relationships in the English language classroom between students and instructor, and in negotiation between students and administrators. The dynamics of a 6-month program in English, offered at an American university for Chinese participants, is better understood through the emerging model than through the more limited and traditional concept of ethnic interaction. In particular, the new model of culture explains the otherwise unexpectedly strong power negotiation by students in the program.

Introduction

In the past few decades, Asian students have increasingly interacted with Western teachers of English. However, this interaction has reportedly produced misunderstanding and friction in the classroom (Li, 1998; Rao, 2001; Chang, 2004) due to differing concepts about effective language learning instructional methods and approaches. This friction is often portrayed as arising from a difference between Asian and Western notions of pedagogy. However, a recent instructional program in the United States for adult Chinese learners suggests that an ethnic model (e.g., “Chinese,” culture versus “American” culture) does not accurately