Tips for Students Studying from this Country

Chinese students are often silent in the classroom, and that is often read as lack of interest or lack of participation in the class. Instructors and domestic students may assume that someone who is quiet during class discussion doesn’t understand the concepts or doesn’t have anything to say. Students should show their willingness to participate whenever they can. If a classroom discussion is underway, students should strive to join it. Students can remind themselves that instructors in American colleges usually see class discussions as active processes of knowledge construction rather than graded performances designed to reveal the knowledge students already have.

In addition, Chinese students often take exemplary notes but don’t seem to understand the class discussion. Students may not realize that they are missing the key elements of the discussion and that they are seen as passive rather than active if they take notes instead of offering up their own comments. Students may plan to study from the notes, but notes taken from the board during a lively discussion will probably not suffice.

These two elements (silence and exact note-taking) suggest a fundamentally different orientation to the classroom and studying that might interfere with success in American colleges. Teachers may see silent students as not participating; meanwhile, students may feel that their attendance and note-taking are the key contribution and that any further interaction must be explicitly called for by the instructor.

Students in my classes have explained that many students from China are afraid to ask questions because they feel that their language production skills aren’t good enough. They believe that they must put in a lot of individual or group study outside of class and attempt to answer the questions themselves before they can ask questions. They worry that they will be perceived as wasting the instructor’s time or wasting their classmates’ time. However, because many college instructors have limited office hours, it
is essential for students to ask questions when instructors are available. Students are often more comfortable asking questions after class, but they should be urged to speak up during the class.

Students may also believe that memorization or rote learning is expected of them. They may believe that memorizing their notes and large chunks of textbooks will make them successful. Instructors may not explicitly state that rote learning is not a major part of their course. Chinese students should ask students and instructors what kinds of learning will occur in the class. Because the education system they’ve grown up with is largely exam-based, students will have to adjust to these different expectations.

Students from China may hesitate to ask for extra help because they may expect instructors to anticipate their needs and care for them. Because they expect a more parent-child oriented relationship—one that most American instructors reject as a rule—students may feel rebuffed, ignored, or badly treated by instructors whose practices match American teaching norms. Students who strive to understand American norms and meet their instructors halfway will probably excel more often than those who do not. In addition, students should be apprised of their institutional resources. Instructors often expect students to recognize their struggles in the classroom and respond by seeking out resources. Most American instructors would be quite surprised to hear that a student did not seek out extra tutoring because he or she had not been instructed to do so.