

Cultural Challenges and Adjustment to University from the Perspective of International Students in China

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Abstract

The need for higher education has prompted many students to seek further studies in international colleges outside their countries and China has become an academic hub for international students who mostly come from developing nations in Africa and Europe. The students, once they secure a place in this schools, they are subjected to a new environment which comes with different challenges. International students in China have become an integral part of the society both social and economical. However the students face a myriad of challenges before fully adopting to the new learning culture. Compared to domestic students, international students possibly encounter more specific challenges, such as language barriers, acculturative stress, separation from loved ones, homesickness, and so on so forth. How to ajust to the new environment and how to overcome the barriers is well worth concerned and discussed, which is what this paper concenbrates on.

Keywords

Cultural challenge, adjustment, international students.

1. Introduction

New international students tend to encounter challenges due to cultural differences in how tasks are carried out in different societies, ranging from buying food to getting a vehicle. Upon arrival in a new country, most international students go through an adjustment process that is usually referred to as culture shock (Zhang and Goodson, 2011). Being faced with multiple new tasks and roles in an unfamiliar culture and being far away from family and friends can induce feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and frustration. One suggestion for overcoming culture shock is to keep ties to one's home culture by communicating with family and friends, watching films from one's home country, and finding foods from one's home culture.

2. Language Barriers

Many studies have consistently identified the language barrier—including writing, reading, listening, and oral skills—as one of the most critical factors affecting academic performance of international students (Ku, et al., 2008). In particular, speaking Chinese (HSK) in front of others can be anxiety-provoking, and this fear can limit the ability of international students to develop social relationships and participate in class discussions.

2.1. Speaking and Listening

For new international students with low or no Chinese proficiency, it may be helpful to learn Chinese by using the mass media of the local culture, such as television, films, and online video

sites. At first, watching programmes with English subtitles can facilitate students' Chinese acquisition with visual and auditory stimuli. At the same time, using subtitles in students' native languages may hinder their ability to learn Chinese vocabulary. Once students are more confident in their listening comprehension, they can turn off the subtitles and see how much they understand. Further, international students tend to experience fear of speaking Chinese because of their imperfect pronunciation and grammar (Brown, 2008). Results from my qualitative research on French international student adjustments suggest that some of international students feel uncomfortable speaking Chinese in front of their international counterparts, who are more likely than local students to tease or judge them (Lee, 2014).

For these reasons, International Students can try some psychological interventions to overcome their anxiety, such as deep-breathing exercises and mental rehearsal (preplanning speech in their mind before saying it) before expressing their ideas.

2.2. Reading and Writing

Some Chinese international students have a difficult time reading because of lack of familiarity with Chinese vocabulary, lack of background knowledge in a subject, a weak understanding of complex syntax and polysemous words, and lack of equivalent words between Chinese and their native language (for example, the English word "insight" does not have any equivalent word in Chinese). Some international students find it helpful to look up the meanings of unfamiliar words in a dictionary and write them in a textbook in their native language. They may also explain concepts to themselves in their native language or use reading strategies such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review). While these strategies can be effective, reading skills take time to develop, and it is common for international students to go through an adjustment period to advance their reading skills, especially at the beginning.

The multicultural experiences of international students can potentially enhance their creativity in academic tasks, such as writing and class presentations (Lee, Therriault, and Linderholm, 2012). However, international students may produce fractured language when trying to convey their ideas in writing. Besides learning vocabulary and grammar to improve their writing skills, international students also need to understand rhetorical differences between their culture of origin and the host culture. For example, the organizational aspects of an essay, such as an introduction, evidence to support claims, and a conclusion, can be as important as grammatical correctness. It is crucial for international students to communicate with their lecturers about expectations for their written work and to read sample papers if possible.

3. Developing Social Relationships

Another cultural adjustment involves social relationships. Many international students hope to make friends with domestic students in order to learn better Chinese and learn about local culture. However, in addition to differences in Chinese proficiency and perceived discrimination, international students from different cultures tend to have expectations that differ from local students' concerning friendship, romantic relationships, personal space, and other social domains (Williams and Johnson, 2011). Therefore, friendships between international and domestic students tend to be somewhat rare.

To understand differences in communication styles, international students can observe domestic students' conversations in different situations, learn what domestic students usually talk about, and try to discuss similar topics. As domestic students may not be familiar with the culture of international students, they may refer to stereotypes and come across as ignorant and so international students should try to be patient in such situations. Some international students stated that they do not know how to find opportunities to develop friendships with domestic students and other international students. Perhaps international students can create opportunities to meet new friends via several routes, such as initiating conversations with

classmates, flatmates, neighbours, and staff; joining different interest and/or religious groups; participating in extracurricular activities such as sports and music; and socializing with students in hall of residence lounges. Furthermore, making friends with domestic students who are interested in learning another language or culture can be beneficial. For example, domestic students taking an English class may be interested in making friends with English speaking students in order to practice Mandarin.

Another possible barrier described by international students is lack of common topics to discuss with domestic students. Some experienced international students have suggested that new international students can relate to domestic students by discussing their disciplines, courses, films, TV shows, sports, religion, and even simple topics such as weather and food. In addition, using social network tools such as WeChat can help international students develop friendships. Some international students have reported that they do not understand the differences in communication styles with local students, which discourages them from initiating conversations. From a sociological perspective, Asian cultures are high-context cultures, which use nonverbal cues and contextual references to communicate. In contrast, US culture is a low-context culture, which mean it relies on explicit content of verbal messages to convey ideas For example, expressions such as “How are you?” “What’s up?” and “How’s it going?” usually mean a simple “Hello” unlike gestures intended to elicit a prolonged conversation.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to enrich the resources available to international students and encourage educators and educational officials to present these recommendations to international students. Although international students face many challenges in their studies, they have plenty of unique strengths, such as their international perspective, independence, courage to live in a foreign country, and multilingual skills. Many international students are very hardworking and devoted to learning. The recommendations in this article may reduce the barriers experienced by international students in order to facilitate their academic success.

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