

Cultural Diversity and Interpersonal Communication : A Study on International Students Studying in China

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Abstract : This paper focuses on the interpersonal interactions among international students with a diverse cultural background who have been staying in China for not more than two years. The aim of this small scale research is to assess the role of intercultural communicative competence in the academic and daily life of the above mentioned international students to investigate international students' perceptions on their Cultural diversity and interpersonal Communication. More specifically, the study targets to research the students' perceptions of how they consider cultural differences in communication and the use of the Chinese language as a lingua franca affected the process of establishing relationships. To meet the demand of the study, a qualitative approach was adopted to investigate this phenomenon as it enabled us to bring out the research participants' own voices, which was the most important criterion for me when making the methodological choices of my study. Adapting to a new culture is an ongoing process. It may be challenging at times, but most students who experience culture shock agree that going through this transition helped them to learn more about themselves and to develop greater confidence in their ability to navigate new situations. Although the number of students who participated in this study was small, the objectives of this pilot study were to identify future areas for research to evaluate in more depth the struggles that international students have with immersing themselves in the local community.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication, Cultural diversity, Chinese language learners, lingua franca

Introduction

The study of intercultural communication tries to analyze how people deal with cultural differences and how they understand and appreciate

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different cultures. Variation in languages, behavior patterns, values and activities make cultures different. Interaction analysis between people can be undertaken at two levels: at the culture-specific level where two particular cultures are assessed through the impact on communication between people of those cultures; another one is the training on alternative cross-status communication styles which motivate members of both cultures to appreciate their differences. The target of this study is to focus on interpersonal relationships between Chinese language learners from different cultural background who have spent no more than two years in China. It is a small scale research which assesses the importance of intercultural communicative competence in the academic and daily life of international students to investigate their perceptions on their cultural diversity and interpersonal Communication.

1. Important terms

1.1 Second language learning and Intercultural Communication

Second language learning involves learning not only about the language but also about the specific culture where the main purpose is to communicate with the target community (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). All types of communicative interaction take place within the social and physical context. When people are communicating within their culture, they are usually aware of the context. However, the context in intercultural communication has a strong impact on the communication process. Even Porter and Samovar (1998) stated that culture is not alive without communication and the communication was not live without culture. Unless both parties are aware of how their cultures affect the contextual element of communication, they might experience major difficulties in communication. Scholars in the field of intercultural communication (Porter & Samovar, 1998; Gudykunst, 2003; Martin & Nakayama, 2004; Byram and Wagner, 2018) consider the link between culture and communication and assume that intercultural communication occurs when a member from one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. In many aspects the relationship between culture and communication can be seen as reciprocal, different conceptualizations of culture bring various perspectives to the phenomenon of intercultural communication. For example, intercultural

communication can be seen as one type of inter-group communication, thus many types of communication can be included in intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2003). The intercultural approach in foreign language learning promotes linguistic competence as well Intercultural Communicative Competence (henceforth, ICC) which aim at developing awareness of the culture when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (Fantini, 2009). However, it is important to be aware that communication for everyone is both cultural and individual (Martin & Nakayama, 2004).

1.2 Interpersonal communication

Communication is an inevitable part of life; we can differentiate one type of communication from others based on the number of persons involved, the type of interaction and the opportunity to give and receive feedback. Interpersonal communication skills can be described as the capacity to communicate effectively with individuals and accept others without prejudice (Beebe, Beebe and Redmond, 2014). In this case, those who fail to communicate report adverse life satisfaction, identity crisis and low relationship development. To exchange ideas both verbal and nonverbal languages can be used to express meaning and emotions between two or more parties. In human communication, the information corresponds to what is simply referred to as ideas or mental representation (Kraus and Morsella, 2000). This indicates in its most elemental form, human communication may be constructed as the process by which ideas contained within one mind are conveyed to other minds. Hofstede (1980) conceived culture as software of mind or mental programming and culture shape the human system of thinking. Thus, people of different cultures when interacting with each other they perceive the message differently. This is the fundamental problem of interpersonal communication when parties have a diverse cultural background.

1.3 Cultural diversity

Diversity issues are now considered essential and are projected to become even more important in the future due to increasing differences in the population of many countries. Cultural diversity has been stated as the representation in one social system of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance, where it can expand the range of options for everyone in our society (Mazur,

2010). Maier (2002) mentions thirty-eight possible diversity dimensions, where multi-dimensionality illustrates as a kaleidoscope to the individual. These diversities have many dimensions that can link to produce unique syntheses of human profiles, made up of both differences and similarities. Culture, social class and language to the primary dimensions where healthcare, beliefs and recreational interests to the secondary dimensions but further adds a tertiary dimension, which encompasses historical moments experienced. The dimensions interact with and influence one another, and are displayed differently in different contexts. There is a definite trend towards definitions of a multiplicity of cultural diversity dimensions. However, in an intercultural context, one of the first challenges is the confrontation of different mother tongues. Therefore, we need to choose a common language to communicate with people. As a result, we choose the Chinese language to collect data from the participants because linguistic deficiency can lead to impoverishment and simplification of communication that can lead to lose information in the exchange. Only through being culturally literate can we understand and read both the surface of any situation and its deeper meanings and wider context.

1.4 Limitations of the study

The range of countries and participants represented in this study has been reduced to small sample size. Besides this, the limited time frame is also considered another factor that has affected the process of data collection

2. Reviewing studies on international students' cross-cultural adaptation

Studying in a different country can be an exciting and challenging experience for international students who have to experience many adjustment problems, particularly those relating to academic, socio-cultural and psychological adjustment (Ward & Kenney 1996). Uehara (1988) investigated international students' cross-cultural adaptation in Japan using Baker's (1981) Freshmen Student Adjustment Scale. The scale focuses on social and cultural aspects, and the dimensions of the scale include studying and researching, mind-body wellness, interpersonal relationships, "culture and economics of the living

environment. According to Sezrle and Ward (1990), cross-cultural adaptation includes two major dimensions, psychological adjustment and socio-cultural adjustment. The psychological adjustment refers to the perceived levels of happiness and satisfaction. However, factors such as pressure, social support, attitude towards interactions with local friends, and other individual factors affect psychological adjustment. Moreover, the factors affecting socio-cultural adjustment are mainly based on social learning theory and thus include assessments on the bases and models of interactions, such as cross-cultural contact, cultural distance, and cross-cultural training. Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) developed the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students, which has been widely used in studies concerning international students. Studies suggest that problems can arise from differences in the linguistically determined discourse of intercultural and interpersonal communication, and the cultural distance of the communication patterns of the participants (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Hsiao-ping et al. (2015) findings reveal that international students deal with academic challenges, social isolation, and cultural adjustment when they enrolled in the US College. While engaging in cultural learning, they have to try to make academic adjustments in a new territory where there are different patterns of teacher-student interactions, classroom cultures, academic requirements and expectations, and different concepts and definitions of what constitutes good teaching and learning. Dorset's (2017) research mentioned the US college international students' adaptation in a new environment depends on individual difference. In intercultural interactions, people frequently adapt communication in response to the feedback or reactions they are receiving during a conversation. Shen et al. (2018) stated mainland students life adaptation in Taiwan is more concerned with living facilities such as the consumption environment, medical care. This diversity creates the potential form of understanding and even conflict arising from the different ways we make sense of the world and share that sense with others.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to discover and describe how international students experience and adapt their new academic, social, cultural and

linguistic environment. The study investigated students' perceptions of how they consider cultural differences in communication styles and the use of the Chinese language as a lingua franca affected the process of establishing relationships. To meet the demand of the study, a qualitative approach was adopted to investigate this phenomenon as it enabled us to bring out the research participants' own voices, which was the most important criterion for me when making the methodological choices of my study. This was mostly based on what people had mentioned about their personal experiences, words were preferred to be collected rather than experimental data. In accordance with Bryman & Bell's study (2007), qualitative strategies were applied in this research. As a part of it, a qualitative research question had been formulated for this study. The main research question was as stated below:

Research question: What type of cultural diversity does the newcomer international students of China experience at the time of their academic and daily interpersonal communication?

In this paper, different literatures and interview information used as the sources of data collection. In detail, the types of data collected for the purpose of this research included open-ended interviews, observation during interviews which was in line with the qualitative research method. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue.

3.1 Data Collection Design

3.1.1. Participants

A subset of international students who were staying in China for more than 6 months and not over 2 years had selected to conduct this research. As they live in the Chinese community, international students needed to communicate with their teachers and peers. The main purpose of this research was to focus on the adaptation techniques of international students in China. The adaptation across intercultural contexts is usually more difficult than adaptation within the own culture because adaptation in another culture requires time and persistence.

Table 1- Final list of participants

Participants list	country	Duration of studying Chinese	Gender
Participant 1	Mongolia	More than 1 year	Male
Participant 2	Mongolia	More than 1 year	Female
Participant 3	Mongolia	More than 1 year	Female
Participant 4	Bangladesh	6 months	Male
Participant 5	Bangladesh	6 months	Male

In China, Chinese universities usually offer one-year language course to learn Chinese, which indicates that students at least require one-year studying Chinese learning program. The newcomer who had been in China for at least 6 months, they learned basic conversation skill. Moreover, we selected some participants who had already finished HSK4 (Chinese language level examination) level of Chinese to know their opinion from the intercultural perspective.

3.1.2 Data Collection

Data was collected for the purpose of this research included open-ended interviews, observation during interviews. We used In-depth interview with semi-structured questions. Building on the range of views that participants had mentioned in their interview session, finally, five out of these participants had been selected for the interview because the responses they presented to the questions asked above seemed to be intriguing and unique. The five participants scheduled a convenient time to meet for the recorded interviews which took place over a period of two weeks. The participants interviewed originate from Mongolia and Bangladesh.

4. Results and data analysis

Based on questions we divided the result into four parameters which indicated international students' interpersonal communication ability in china. These parameters were:

- Daily life communication
- Intercultural experience
- Adopting a new culture
- Cultural Differences

We did not follow the question order to select these parameters, which helped us to get spontaneous answers from the participants.

4.1 Daily life communication

There were two sub-parameters to analyze the data under this parameter.

4.1.1 Language priority

In order to improve their abilities in intercultural cultural communication, language learners should develop not only their language competence but also communicative competence. The learning of a foreign language inevitably involves the learning of foreign cultures. Therefore, language is a part of the culture and a means of the culture transmission at the same time, language is influenced by culture and also influences culture itself.

International students also experience unique adjustment issues and a sense of isolation as a result of studying in china. The language barriers prevented students from effectively communicating with lecturers and other students, listening to lectures, following instructions, understanding assessment criteria and procedures, completing assignments, doing exams and tests, and socializing with domestic residents. Because of language difficulties, many participants had to work very hard in order to keep up with the rest of the class. In the process of intercultural communication, international students were seesawing between contradictions, inconsistencies, and conflicting ideologies. They live in a world of paradoxes that could be managed and minimized only, in this situation culture shock is a common experience. It leads to the feelings of confusion, stress and disorientation that occur when entering an unfamiliar culture. Toyokawa (2002) pointed out that in abroad international students experience difficulty including culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to customs and values, differences in education systems, isolation and loneliness, homesickness and a loss of established social networks.

In China, international students needed to use Chinese as well as the English language for daily life communication with Chinese people. The amount of use the Chinese language for communication was different among participants. For instance, who were staying in China for more

than one year generally use Chinese language as their mode of communication. However, other participants who were in china for more than six months they usually preferred English language because their Chinese language proficiency was not standard.

4.1.2 Interaction with locals

All of the participants thought that Chinese people are very friendly and helpful and interactions with locals help them not only develop language skills but also get to know more about Chinese society. For example, P1 ('P' stands for participant) mentioned that communication with Chinese people was an opportunity to improve Chinese language and make new friends, P2 and P3 also agreed with the statement. Moreover, P-4 and P-5 said, they also had few local friends, but they use the English language for communication.

4.2 Intercultural experience

In order to improve students' consciousness on intercultural communication and cultivate their socio-cultural abilities, the best way is to immerse them in the Chinese cultural atmosphere and make contact with native speakers in person. It is an effective method to improve our socio-cultural abilities through cultural performance. For example, a student can imitate the situation in daily life, such as greetings, chats, reserving by telephone, sending a birthday present, etc. P1 mentioned that he consciously avoided buying watches and umbrella as a gift for Chinese friends as these represent bad luck in Chinese culture. He also expressed the importance of understanding and respect the views of others and their customs while communicating. P2 and P4 agreed that before coming in china they thought all Chinese people were good at martial art (kungfu) as like many international students but later they found out that its only very common scenario in movies. In addition, P3 said, all of them were living in international students' dormitory; it's a great opportunity being familiar with different cultures under the same roof. P5 also supported that the real-life experience of intercultural communication helped them to find friends who had common interest and it was like building a network with different people at the same place.

Moreover, studying in China was the first experience for all the participants, where they had encountered with different cultural

beliefs, norm and values. For example, all of the participants stated they had friends from different countries on social websites which were not very useful to know cultural barriers as well as distinctive features of the country and a particular community. However, when they came to China, it became easier to get in touch and gather new knowledge about Chinese society and cultures. Every day they needed to communicate with a Chinese teacher, classmates or friends who helped them to understand Chinese society. At present, this opportunity assists them to overcome cultural barriers, which indicates do and don't in different countries. In addition, Most of the participants considered that if in future they have an opportunity to go to another country, they would appreciate it. Hence, they had already experienced a multicultural community while studying in China, which means they know how to deal with different people from different countries.

4.3 Adopting a new culture

Cross-cultural adaptation is the combination of social and psychological conditions of the learners and the target language (Kinging, 2009). According to participants, when the host environment embraced diversity it helped them transition better. For instance, P-3 said, avoidance was one of her best coping mechanisms at those very initial stages, so all the things that she had encountered as culture-shocked, she tried to avoid exposure to those things as much as possible until she could realise that it could be learned. She gave an example of food habit of Chinese people, in China people like to share food with each other, whereas in her country it was not very common. After coming to China she had to adapt the situation.

P4 and P5 said, taking pictures in the street with random strangers was very uncommon in their culture, which had considered a matter of privacy. However, this is a common practice in China, it is better to get used to with this situation. P1 and P2 mentioned the same point that they were culturally shocked when Chinese people greet them "Have you eaten?", which was a very unusual expression for their culture. However, to communicate with Chinese people they also had learnt how to greet Chinese people in their way. Based on the above statements, the participants were able to adapt to the new culture.

They were trying to adopt this new culture to overcome the communication barrier, where they used the Chinese language as a communication tool.

4.4 Cultural Differences

Cultural differences are normally listed as dissimilar language, background, perceptions and mentalities. According to Hofstede (2011), culture is civilization, training and mind. They are not rules that regulate social behaviors but they help people distinguish one group from another. Communicating across cultures is challenging. Each culture has set rules that its members take for granted. Based on the range of views across the interviews the participants' description of what they miss most about their country depicted the cultural differences their countries and the host country have. Some of the examples of these differences they mentioned were the importance of their family closeness/relationships, their friendships, language differences, the food they missed, the confidence of familiar expectations, etc.

P5 explained "Being home" indicated that a place where most day to day things like food, local media and people's expectations would be familiar with each other. P3 agreed with some of the points above, she said, she missed the closeness (social interactions), the understanding of own culture, the food, and the people. Likewise, P2 explained that he also missed his family, best friends and different types of food especially meats. Additionally, P1 also said some common point with P2 and P3, he said he really missed different types of dishes from his country. P4 mentioned, he also wanted unconditional caring of friends and family. He also depicted, due to cultural and language differences it was also hard to make good friend in China. He explained further, the friendships he had with a country friend is a long term relationship and they knew each other better. Moreover, cultural differences are a broad term that has other branches that stem from it. As evidenced in the participants' statements, the variance in the cultural differences between their countries and China takes a while to adjust to, because graduate international students' previous culture is something they have been used to for years. For this reason, it is hard for them to maintain a balance between both cultures.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the relationship between international students' cross-cultural adaptation and the dominant language as Chinese and put emphasis on the relationship between the linguistic competence acquired from studying abroad and the level of cross-cultural adaptation, as well as how they affect each other. It was found that international students' cross-cultural adaptation concerning the dimension of studying and researching was closely related to their Chinese proficiency and that the level of Chinese ability would affect the amount of cross-cultural adaptation. Adapting to a new culture is an ongoing process. It may be challenging at times, but most students who experience culture shock agree that going through this transition helped them to learn more about themselves and to develop greater confidence in their ability to navigate new situations. Although the number of students who participated in this study was small, the objectives of this pilot study were to identify future areas for research to evaluate in more depth the struggles that international students have with immersing themselves in the local community.

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