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Cultural Adaptation: A Case Study of Asian Students' Learning Experiences at a New Zealand University

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ABSTRACT

More than eighty-five percent of international students in New Zealand are Asian in origin. The level of satisfaction of Asian international students with their learning experiences in New Zealand has been of enormous concern for the New Zealand export education industry. The results of this current research, based on a qualitative research approach conducted at a New Zealand tertiary institution, provide a critical summary of some important and yet challenging issues in teaching Asian students. This study found that Asian students were overall satisfied with their learning experiences at the university in terms of educational quality and programme offering. Asian students' voices and narratives on which this research was based have challenged some of our taken-for-granted educational traditions, norms, and practices. Characterising these challenges are language difficulties and cultural differences as intercultural communication barriers, unfamiliar patterns of classroom interactions, lack of knowledge of academic norms and conventions, and inadequate learning support, all these combining to impact on Asian students' perceptions and levels of satisfaction with their learning experiences at the university. The study suggests that it is important that lecturers and host institutions are professionally responsible to equip Asian students with adequate knowledge of academic discourses, and help them transcend the culturally framed borders and subjectivities. To meet these challenges, it is important to review and adapt our pedagogical practices and to realign them to the needs of both local and international students.

Key words: Asian students, intercultural communication, international education, learning experiences, teaching approaches, cultural differences, cultural adaptation

INTRODUCTION

The presence of international students in New Zealand has attracted considerable attention from central and local governments, education providers, educators, scholars and researchers. A recent report commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Internationalisation in New Zealand Tertiary Education, found that 'the quality and sustainability of the domestic system will ultimately depend on the nature and extent of international engagement' (New Zealand Education Review 2006, p. 1). According to the figures provided by Education New Zealand, the number of full fee-paying international students in New Zealand in 2005 was 82,436, of whom 37, 207 (45% of the total) studied at tertiary institutions. Over 85% of these international students came from Asia.

The export education industry in New Zealand suffered a serious setback in 2005: there was a 15% overall drop in the number of international students in the whole education export. The rising New Zealand dollar, changes in New Zealand immigration policies, and adverse publicity are often blamed for the falling numbers. It is suggested that as long as quality assurance is in place, New Zealand export education industry will stand firm and steady (Richardson March 26-April 2005).

However, how international students, particularly Asian students, perceive the quality of our education remains unexplored.

Our current research, conducted at a New Zealand tertiary institution in 2005, attempted to explore and examine some of the challenges through a qualitative research approach. Listening to students' voices and their stories helped identify and address some of the issues that these Asian students face. Students' voices, narratives or stories are lenses through which we view and review our teaching practices as well as students' learning experiences, levels of satisfaction, perceptions, intentionality, values, beliefs, desires, feelings, and aspirations. Our research findings provide a critical summary of Asian students' perceptions regarding current teaching practices and issues in teaching Asian students at the host institution.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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 1993). 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). In other words, the closer the student culture is to that of the host community, the easier the interaction and adjustment will be (Mehdizadeh & Scott 2005). 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 (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham 2001). Having met the entrance requirements of English language standards does not ensure that they are well prepared to make adjustment in order to succeed in the new educational system in the ongoing adjustment process (Jepson, Turner, & Calway 2002).

Asian students have difficulties adjusting to the unfamiliar Western culture of learning where Socratic dialogical practices are the norm featuring 'questioning, criticising, refuting, arguing, debating and persuading' (Major 2005, p. 85). There are many factors that influence Asian student cultural adaptation, such as English language skills, prior learning experiences, beliefs, cultural values, conceptions of learning, personal traits, and motivations (Berno & Ward 2004). Byrne's (2001) study of learning experiences of Asian and Caucasian students indicates that Asians were more depressed, had more fears of loss of face, held more negative beliefs about the self and the world, and they perceived to have received less social support when compared to Caucasians.

Sherry, Bhat, Beaver and Ling (2003) studied students' perceptions of services experienced by both domestic and international students at the UNITEC Institute of Technology in New Zealand, these services including learning support, quality teaching, staff-student communication, and feedback from tutors. It was found that there was a significant difference between the two groups: International students perceived the services as being much lower than domestic students, and international students felt that their expectations had not been met.

Ward and Masgoret (2004) conducted a national survey of the experiences of international students studying in New Zealand's secondary and composite schools, language schools, polytechnics and universities. The results of their survey corroborate the findings from Newall and Daldy's (2004) survey at Auckland University of Technology in 2003: respondents from Asian countries were less satisfied with their overall learning experiences than respondents from other countries.

Loorparg, Tait, Yates, and Meyer (2006) note that the Eurocentric curricula in New Zealand disadvantage non-European students in their academic acculturation, reinforce cultural superiority, and impose cultural values upon international students who hold different cultural values. Achieving academic success may mean to these international students that it is they who have to adjust,

change, or give up their identity to assume a new one, and accept the host cultural values so that they can communicate with their lecturers on the same level of discourse (Berstein 1996).

It is suggested in literature that student learning experiences and their satisfaction with them reflect student attitudinal outcomes and perceptions of the educational quality of the host institution (Donald & Denison 1996). A substantial weight in higher education should be given to students' satisfaction with, and their perceptions of, the value of their academic learning experience that are indicative of students' attitudes toward the curricula, programme delivery, quality of instruction, and learning support of the host institution (Rautopuro & Vaisanen 2000).

Informetric (2003) identified quality education as being a top risk factor affecting export education in New Zealand, followed by the financial security of the provider, international recognition and credibility of the provider, and overall management of the students. Ward and Masgoret's (2004) survey indicates that Asian students are more concerned with high quality education, have lower levels of satisfaction with their learning experiences, and experience more adjustment problems relating to academic difficulties and intellectual challenges than students from Europe, South America, North America, and Australia.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was adopted: twenty-two participants were recruited (see the following tables). They participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting 45 minutes to one hour. The criteria for participant selection were as follows: participants were business undergraduate students of Asian origin who had been in New Zealand and had studied at the university for at least one year.

Participants		Age			Time in New Zealand			
Male	Female	20 or under	21-24	25-29	1 yr+	2 yrs+	3 yrs+	4 yrs
9	13	2	13	7	2	6	10	4

Ethnicity								
P.R. China	Hong Kong	Thailand	India	Cambodia	Vietnam	Indonesia	E. Timor	Total
15	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	22

The sampling population roughly matches the international student profiling at the university campus, with Mainland Chinese being the dominant group. In some business-related papers at the university, more than eighty per cent of the students were Chinese.

There is an assumption that international students experience adjustment difficulties in the initial period at institutions of higher learning, especially in the first semester, although cultural adaptation is a gradual process, and many of these difficulties will gradually disappear during the process of cultural transition (Heggins & Jackson 2003). We assumed that after one year of study at the university, they had become familiar with the New Zealand academic culture, patterns of teacher-student interactions, and the university learning environment, and thus had adjusted well academically, socio-culturally, and psychologically by developing their intercultural and interpersonal communication skills and coping strategies. This study examined their academic adjustment issues by drawing on their past and present learning experiences at the university through their own narrative stories.

This research attempted to examine the learning experiences of Asian students at the university, their perceptions of the educational quality, and their personal and intellectual growths in the process of cultural adaptation. The interview questions addressed their learning experiences, learning skills, academic difficulties, their attitudes towards instructional methods, the perceptions of educational quality, relationship with lecturers and with domestic and other international

students, and their recommendations for the university to improve its practice for international students. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and coded. For ethical reasons, the names of all the students mentioned in this report are pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

Many important themes emerged from careful analysis of the data. Many Asian students perceived the educational quality they had received at the university very positively. They had to work very hard to adapt well to the academic life at the university where they experienced many difficulties deriving from lack of knowledge of academic norms and conventions, insufficient learning support, unfamiliar teaching methods, and cultural differences in classroom interactions.

Asian Students' Perceptions of the Education Quality

International students' level of satisfaction is related to their perceptions of the education quality they have received from the host institution. They have personally experienced the curriculum and programme delivery, and therefore they are in the best position to describe their learning experiences, perceptions, and attitudes in terms of learning outcomes (Rautopuro & Vaisanen 2000).

This research reveals that much of student satisfaction is related to the degree of their cultural adaptation; that is, the better they adapt to the new environments, the more positive their learning experience is. Most participants reported having adapted well to the new learning situations, although they still had some difficulties in their learning and they still retained their own cultural traits as demonstrated in their personal accounts, such as high learning expectations, achieving motivations, self or parent-imposed learning pressures, strong sense of competition, and deep respect for teachers. In the process of cultural adaptation, on the one hand, they made every attempt to adapt to the new learning culture; on the other hand, they tried to make best use of learning skills acquired in their own countries.

Most participants reported a relatively high level of satisfaction with their study at the host university. Their satisfaction derived from their academic adaptation, language skills development, intellectual growth, academic achievements, development of academic, social, intercultural, and interpersonal skills, confidence in learning, learner independence, and gradual changes in their learning conceptualisations. At an institutional level, they were happy with the quality of education, practical programmes, favourable learning environments, quality services, and effective learning support systems. Most participants described their lecturers as being highly qualified, experienced, professional, knowledgeable, patient, helpful, empathetic, competent, well organised, friendly, and understanding. Avinda described her learning experiences at the university as 'outstanding'.

Some transformational changes were reported in student personal and intellectual growths. Many students said that their biggest achievements were their independent learning skills that transformed their learning experiences. When they arrived in New Zealand, Yi and Anni held the belief and expectations that teachers should be strict, always directing and pushing students and monitoring their progress. After three years of study in New Zealand, they realised that they had changed a great deal, from being dependent to independent. They found that their newly acquired independent skills gave them empowerment both in their academic studies and social life.

Most participants felt satisfied with teacher-student relationships and patterns of classroom interactions. They were deeply impressed with the flat, rather than hierarchical, mode of teacher-student classroom interactions. Rikki likened his teachers to 'senior students' who would like to share and construct knowledge with their students and encourage them to explore new knowledge through open discussions on an equal basis. He enjoyed this kind of classroom interaction and equal teacher-student relationship.

Adapting to the new academic environment was considered tough. Almost all respondents described research, writing assignments, and referencing as most difficult because of lack of knowledge of academic conventions practised in New Zealand. However, they all reported having

acquired adequate research and writing skills in their study, in spite of all the difficulties and hardships that they had experienced. Many Asian students' learning expectations were related to their future work. Their biggest concern was the relevance of the programmes they were studying. This research found that most Asian students were happy with the programmes for their relevance, practicality, and currency. Iris and Jennifer commented that they had received good education at the university through the practical, useful, flexible and work-related programmes. The skills acquired from these programmes, they acknowledged, could be easily transferred to workplaces and real businesses.

Language Difficulties as Communication Barriers

This study confirms earlier research findings that English language is one of the biggest barriers for international students in New Zealand (Li, Baker & Marshall 2002). The language barriers prevented Asian 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 socialising with domestic residents. Because of the language difficulties, many participants had to work very hard in order to keep up with the rest of the class. They spent most of their time, including weekends, in the classroom and in the library. To many participants, attending the lectures as such was not an enjoyable experience.

Lack of Knowledge of Academic Conventions

Ward and Masgoret's (2004) national survey ranked 'writing assignments' as the fifth top academic difficulty for international students in New Zealand after 'making oral presentations', 'taking tests or exams', 'expressing yourself in English', and 'expressing opinions to the teacher'. Our study, however, reveals that writing assignments was seen as most difficult. Asian students' difficulties were derived from insufficient knowledge of academic conventions that are not explicitly taught in class, such as writing literature reviews, critical reviews and essays, business and field reports, research proposals, case study analysis, and documenting references. Many participants came directly from secondary schools and had never received any training in Western academic conventions. Even those who had completed their undergraduate studies in their home countries lacked such knowledge of, and skills in, these conventions. They reported that they often had to grope in the dark, through trial and error.

The length of study at the university did not ensure that students had acquired the basic knowledge of academic writing conventions. For instance, Salic, who had studied in Singapore and the UK, and had been at the university for one year and a half, complained that he had never received any training in academic conventions, such as essay writing, citations, and research writing, and as a result he often got low marks for his written assignments. Anni had been studying at the university for about three years, but she still had difficulty writing a reasonably good essay or business report because the required structures, forms, and formats often confused her. Furthermore, writing is related to reading. Most participants reported having difficulties with the assigned academic readings. Critically reviewing the concepts, ideas, and theories of these readings could be doubly difficult.

Inadequate Learning Support

Adequate learning support was found lacking in the accessibility of some lecturers, in obtaining information and lecturers' feedback. Jack was generally satisfied with his learning at the university. However, he held some negative views. He felt he had been abandoned because, in his view, he had received minimal help from some lecturers: 'I just feel they don't help me too much. I learn on my own.' Like Jack, Sunny believed that the university was a good university, but the quality is diluted when academic support was not in place. He felt stressed and disappointed because he had not received necessary learning support and guidance from some lecturers.

Inaccessibility to lecturers was raised as a concern. Asking questions in class seemed impossible in large classes but asking questions after the class was even more impossible because lecturers, as Tony had observed, 'disappeared more quickly than students' and some lecturers were often not available during their designated office hours. Making appointments with lecturers, in Cindy's

experience, was impractical because some lecturers were rarely available to provide support. Cindy felt disappointed because she was doing a difficult paper and she really needed some support, but she had not received necessary assistance. She had to rely on herself, rather than on the lecturer, to address her own learning problems. Sunny, too, was critical of lecturers' inaccessibility and insufficient learning support at the university. He asserted, 'To be honest, I got very poor experience' at the university.

Inadequate learning support was also found in information dissemination. Some participants claimed that they had never heard of or had never used the learning support services that the university offered. Helen, for example, never had any access to the WebCT where lecturers post their lecture notes and other online learning resources. Kathy was not aware of available learning support services. Most lecturers encourage students to use the electronic databases to access articles for their assignments, but Jack stated that he had never visited the site, for lack of information and guidance. Lack of sufficient learning support led to some Asian students' negative feelings and perceptions. For example, Jie held a very negative view about the teaching approaches adopted by some lecturers at the university: 'I feel that it's more like, people are more selfish. They won't care about you. ... so you have to do it all by yourself.'

Another learning support service is lecturers' feedback on students' assignments. Giving students valuable, reflective, constructive and facilitative feedback on their performance is an important skill for all lecturers. Due to various reasons, such as large class sizes, time pressure, lecturers' efforts, willingness, skills, preferences, insights, attitudes and approaches, the significance of providing feedback is often under-emphasized. Our research findings suggest that most Asian students were not satisfied with the feedback on their assignments. The feedback they received from the lecturers was described as 'hard to understand', and not specific enough to be of any value at all. Avinda expected her lecturers to provide specific feedback so that she could use it to improve her academic performance.

Cultural Differences in Classroom Interactions

Asian students have to make every effort to adapt in order to make sense of it when studying at New Zealand tertiary institutions where the Socratic teaching approach is predominant that emphasises independent learning, learner participation, co-construction of knowledge, questioning, critical analysis and evaluation of information and ideas. Unfamiliarity with such a tertiary academic discourse often creates barriers for Asian students in classroom participation, interaction and engagement.

In our current study, many participants asserted that they enjoyed independent learning, but when the lecturers adopted teaching methods aiming to facilitate student independent learning skills, these students felt disheartened when they found that these methods were incompatible with their expectations. Yi found it difficult to adjust to the teaching methods at the university where students are encouraged to develop their own independent and analytical skills and take responsibility for their learning.

Tody and Jack had a similar experience. To them, lecturers did not deliver much of the knowledge that students were expected to learn; instead, they wanted students to apply the very little knowledge they have acquired from the past to their current study. To them it was unfair and unethical for lecturers to require students to produce more outputs than the inputs they had received. Kathy also pointed out that the current teaching methods adopted by the lecturers at the university were based on an assumption that students had already been equipped with independent learning skills, which became an intercultural communication barrier that both lecturers and Asian students had to transcend.

One of the features of the Socratic teaching approach is student active participation in classroom activities. However, eliciting Asian students' responses to these interactive activities seemed to be very difficult. Many participants still felt that they were reluctant to participate. It is obvious that culture had influenced these students' learning expectations and patterns of classroom interactions. They felt uncomfortable when they were given opportunities to participate in all

learning activities and to have ownership of their own learning. They were familiar with the cultural norm: teachers teach and students listen. Student participation in critical discussions and debates at a whole-class did not make any sense to them. Years of training in New Zealand did not seem to have changed their learning conceptualisations.

Rikki, having been in New Zealand for three years, held a conflicting view about student participation. On the one hand, he found it very important to learning; on the other hand, he felt uncomfortable with this approach. He wanted to participate in order to listen to others from whom he could gain some insights, but he was very reluctant to contribute or comment on the views made by other fellow students. He found it difficult to adapt to the participation discourse by changing his learning strategies. Tony did not want to participate in classroom discussions because he believed he had come to learn, not to contribute. It seemed to him that learning and contribution were not related. To him, group discussions were a waste of time.

DISCUSSION

Asian international students live across two cultures, and it is natural for them to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of each educational system from their own perspectives. They live an academic life filled with paradoxes. For example, they found independent learning important, but they also expected lecturers to 'push' them. They enjoyed interactive teaching approaches, but they were reluctant to participate and to contribute. They liked the pressure-free learning environment, but they found it uncomfortable when competition and high pressure were apparently lacking. The paradoxes puzzled Asian students who made attempts to cross the borders through a painful process of cultural and academic adaptations in order to fulfil their preset goals. The negative sides of the paradoxes lowered their level of satisfaction with their learning experiences in New Zealand. Academics and host institutions play a key role in assisting Asian students in managing paradoxes in their cultural and academic adaptations.

Another important issue that emerged from this study was Asian students' insufficient knowledge of academic norms and conventions. In other words, Asian students lacked academic literacy that became a major obstacle in their learning. Having passed IELTS test does not mean they are academically literate. Academic literacy involves linguistic, rhetorical, discursive, socio-cultural, cognitive, political and content knowledge (Woodrow 2005). Academic literacy requires 'disciplinary enculturation', specialized knowledge, and a profound understanding of norms and conventions that are embedded in cultural values and beliefs, and it is 'an experience that is ongoing, layered, and necessarily always incomplete' (Casanave 2002, p.27). Casanave compares academic literacy to games which are played according to rules, conventions, and strategies.

Asian international students were playing a game without being engaged intensively in disciplinary enculturation and without adequate training to know these rules and conventions. Years of study at the university did not seem to advance their game playing skills. To add to the complexity, these rules and conventions are rarely explicit, which made their learning, especially writing, doubly difficult. They often failed to understand the cultural subtleties of the forms of 'dress code' (Boughey 2000, p. 288). These Asian students were expected to take responsibilities for their own learning and they must learn by themselves these cultural norms and unarticulated rules.

Cultural differencing emerged as a pedagogical issue in the classroom intercultural communication. Many of the underlying discourses of Western pedagogies are often taken for granted as 'the ethnic defaults' (Doherty 2005, p. 9), such as individual development, the learner participation discourse, group discussion, patterns of classroom interactions, assessment requirements, and criteria for writing assignments. Such a university disciplinary power is often seen as 'forms of truth and knowledge' that should not be questioned or challenged (Koehne 2004, p. 3). Asian international students found themselves disadvantaged within such a classroom regime and their voices often silenced. The onus is placed on international students to adapt to the host learning contexts where they are studying. Lecturers do not seem to have to take responsibilities to adapt to the changing classroom culture in the era of education globalisation. McLaughlin (1995)

emphasizes that it is 'professionally irresponsible' (p.112) to assume that only students have to adapt and accommodate while academics insist on maintaining their positions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has found from Asian international students' voices and narratives that Asian students were overall satisfied with their learning experiences at the university. These positive experiences were related to a large number of factors, such as high quality education, practical programmes, favourable learning environments, friendly, helpful, supportive, and highly qualified lecturers and tutors, good teacher-student relationships, development of language and intercultural communication skills, and personal and intellectual growth. They expressed their concerns in these areas: language difficulties and cultural differencing as intercultural communication barriers, unfamiliar patterns of classroom interactions, lack of knowledge of academic norms and conventions, and inadequate learning support. In the process of intercultural communication, Asian international students were seesawing between contradictions, inconsistencies, and conflicting ideologies. They lived in a world of paradoxes that could be managed and minimized only. The study suggests that in the age of globalization, it is important that lecturers and host institutions are professionally responsible to make adaptations to help Asian international students cope with these paradoxes, equip them with adequate knowledge of academic discourses, and transcend the culturally framed borders and subjectivities. Asian students' voices and narratives have challenged our taken-for-granted educational traditions, norms, and practices. To meet these challenges, it is important to review and adapt our pedagogical practices and to realign them to the needs of both local and international students.

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