

The Challenges Chinese Students Face in Australia

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ABSTRACT

With an increasing number of Chinese students in Australia, they will face a lot of challenges in social life and academic study in this country. This article explores the stressors that Chinese students face while studying in Australia. It first introduces the English teaching within the Chinese context, and secondly it moves to provide a framework of previous studies. Thirdly, three factors have been generated based on the participants' feedbacks, who believe those are the main factors that hinder their study effectively in Australia. Lacking sufficient language skills result in difficulties in the interaction between students and teachers, peer-cooperation, and a sense of social isolation. Based on the findings, suggestions are provided on English Language training with effective teaching methods used when they come to Australia.

Keywords: Stressor, Faculty-student Interaction, Chinese international student, Language insufficiency

INTRODUCTION

A policy has been set up by Chinese Central Government since the 1970s. It has been strongly advocated to enhance academic interaction between Chinese scholars and western staff so as to develop national economy and technology, which has directly led to the increase interaction between Chinese and western scholars in education (Lampton, Madancy, & Williams, 1986). According to the recent statistics of Education Office, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Australia (2007), there were 90,287 Chinese mainland students enrolled in Australia institutions in 2006, which took up 23.5 percent of all international students in Australia. The numbers increased by 10.5 percent compared with those in 2005, which became the largest international group followed by Indians. In the recent five years, the number continually increased to more than 100,000 Chinese mainland students. Among those large Chinese international population in Australia, more than 40,000 students study in New South Wales, about 26,000 in Victoria and Tasmania and approximate 24,000 in other states of Australia. In this large family, more than half of Chinese International students came to Australia to pursue higher education (Doctors, masters and undergraduates) and only 13 percent of total want to receive vocational education in Australia. Hence, the largest Chinese group in Australia is the students in higher institutions (Education Office, 2007), which is worthy of investigating and doing research on this group.

BACKGROUND

Under Australian educational system, Chinese international students will face a great challenge and cultural conflict because there is a huge gap between two countries, such as language, culture, political ideology and social framework. Particularly, the intercultural difficulties make Chinese students feel

confused to be adapted to (Klein, Miller, & Alexander, 1981). Yang and Glum (1994) believes that the larger gaps in the intercultural environment, the more difficult the international students will find out to survive in the society. Therefore, it seems that in Australia culture, Chinese international students should need longer time to get used to it in contrast to other European and American international students. In addition, Yang and Glum (1994) finds out that international students who come from Africa and the third World countries have felt more stressful in academic learning.

After reviewing the recent literature, the author finds out few literature has focused about the academic stressors of Chinese international students in Australia. Hence, this research that explores the stressors of the largest international student group seems essential and significant. The specific questions needed to be researched in this article are:

- Which is the strongest academic stressor among Chinese international students in Australia?
- What aspects will this strongest academic stressor influence Chinese international students in Australia?
- What is the challenge and effort should be put into helping Chinese international students to be soon accustomed to Australia?

RESEARCH METHDOLOGY

This research adopts semi structured-interview, which is more flexible and can get more effective information from participants. Meanwhile, the correspondents can rethink profoundly (Mill, 2001) and the researchers could get all-round information from the complicated factors among those all for Chinese international students. Nineteen participants, who are studying in UTAS and Queensland University, have taken part in this semi structured-interview. The age ranges from 22-30, majoring in Law, Education, Biochemistry, Engineering, Sociology and Chemistry and Environment and Arts and all of them are Master and PhD students. The longest time the person who has been in Australia is for 12 years and the shortest one is just four months The time allocated for the interview is two hours and digital recorder is used for each interviewee. Qualitative analysis is used by the method of Miles and Huberman (1994). In order to keep the privacy of the interviews in this research, Chinese students' names are replaced by students' number, which has been ranged from No. 1 to No.19 according to the order of each interviewee.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on the data collected from the semi structured-interview, it is obvious to discover that there are three sources of academic stressors, they are, the interaction between Chinese students and academic staff, the academic achievement and language barrier. The researcher only gives depth exploration of the stressors coming from language barrier in this paper. All the participants have agreed that language barrier is the most important factor which would influence their learning and living in Australia. Specifically, it causes students to have difficulties in interacting with professors and peers in university, lacking confidence in autonomous learning and being involved in intercultural environment.

Interaction between professors and Chinese international students

The research shows that language efficiency directly results in the interaction between academic staff and Chinese international students in Australia universities. In order to avoid embracement and shyness in classroom, most Chinese international students would not like to speak English frequently in

universities. It is even worse that some PhD candidates are feel shameful to communicate with their supervisors just because of being afraid of being found of poor spoken English. Hence, it is not surprisingly to see that the poor interaction between staff and Chinese international students due to lack of communication in English. The following transcript of the answers has been obtained from No.3 student.

Although I have been in Queensland University for a year, I usually feel so anxious and nervous while talking with my supervisors. Because of my poor spoken English, the professors always get lost in my meaning. What is more, I often fail in understanding some jokes or slangs when talking with them (academic staff). Hence, worries and anxiety during talk make me become timid, which leads to more errors in my experiments. In order to avoid exposure of my poor spoken English, I try my best to shorten the time of discussion with supervisors and group members.

Another example comes from student No. 12. The following transcript has been outlined by the researcher.

Before I came to Queensland University, I have been in National University of Singapore for two years- Master study. Singapore, a place where is full of Asians, students do not need to speak English at all because most of them are Chinese offspring. Therefore, when I came to Australia in 2007, I found my academic writing was poor for so many grammar mistakes and misspellings, which surprised my supervisor team and they even thought that I would be a loser in my Doctor study here. At present, I could not imagine how I suffered in my first year in the university.

Besides the spoken and written English insufficiency, another student, No.6 said that she was frustrated in academic reading since a lack of enough English vocabularies and some bad reading habits. Consequently, she felt it had significantly influenced her academic performance when she was required to join in group discussion in the classroom. The feedback has been got from some researcher's questions.

Q1 What do you think is the most important stressor source in your MA study?

A1 I think it is my English ability, I mean I am not good at reading most time.

Q2 What aspects do you think is the stumbling block in English reading?

A2 Well, it must be short of English vocabulary. I do not like reciting words, which makes me reading books after class very ineffectively.

Q3 How or What method do you often use for reading academic books after class?

A3 That is really hard for me! I often read those books line by line because there are many news words. When I meet them, I would stop reading and pick up electronic dictionary to look them up, which costs me a lot of time every day. But the worse thing is that I often forget those words in less than a week so that I have to do it repeatedly.

Q4 What is the chain action of failing in reading effectively after class?

A4 I feel so ashamed when the academic staff calls me to answer questions because I could not understand totally what the book wants to tell me. Consequently, in the group discussion, I could not do a well-organized presentation. Hence, day by day, the group members and staffs would not like to discuss problems with me, which results in a vicious cycle.

Those examples above show that English insufficiency becomes the most important obstacle for them to communicate effectively with their professors and group peers. In addition, inadequate spoken English, writing and reading skills prevent them from making great academic achievement in Australia.

Autonomous learning and teacher's instruction in Australia universities

It is known to us all that the autonomous learning has been in a prosperous stage in western academic world over the last 20 years. Many scholars in the literatures have illustrated its benefits (Brookes & Grundy, 1988; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1987, 1995; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Esch, 1994; H Holec, 1981, 1988; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Willing, 1989). Holec (1981) believes that students should take responsibility of their own learning by determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures of acquisition and evaluating what has been acquired. It presupposes a positive attitude to the purpose, content and process of learning (Little, 1996). The learner is perceived as a decision-maker who will develop the capacity for choosing available tools and resources to fulfill their tasks in hand (Dickinson, 1995; H. Holec, 1985; Little, 1991). Therefore, developing positive attitudes towards learner autonomy are regarded as crucial to the success of the development of learner autonomy, and is an essential goal of any courses. Meanwhile, teacher's instruction cannot be ignored since cultivating learners autonomy does not mean total self-learning at home. Therefore, in this circumstance, Chinese international students, particularly, those who have never studied in other western countries will feel puzzled and come to their wits' end. With the deep going of the interview and the researcher's final analysis, the responses from the participants highlighted English language insufficiency, which was the main reason to confuse them conducting learning autonomy. The following response is from students No1.

When I studied in China, teaching materials and outlets were prepared by the teachers before class. What the students should do is to attend classes on time, sitting in the classroom quietly and listening to the lecturers. In China, the measurement for a good student is to finish assignment on time, get a high score in exams and obey schools rules. Inside and outside classroom, fixed timetables have pushed students to receive information and acquire knowledge passively. When students come back to home, they should finish the assignments and hand in to teachers on time. Hence, when I took my first year MA study in Australia, I felt so miserable because the staff in the university would force me to study in class. Studying time is more flexible in Australian universities and most students want to share information by group discussion and on-line learning. Every week, we have several hours for tutorial work and professors only guide us to think and acquire knowledge instead of imparting it to students. After class, students can assign their learning time for each unit, decide what learning materials they need for experiments and have access to join in more extracurricular activities. However, due to my English insufficiency, I could not quite understand the teachers' instruction. Consequently, most time I fail in monitoring my learning process and evaluating my learning outcomes. As time goes by, I gradually lose confidence in autonomous learning in student's center.

Another example is from student No.8, who often misunderstands the instruction of university staff.

Although I have been in Tasmania for more than ten years, I first came here only for making a fortune so I did not like other international students who have got band 6 in IELTS. In those years working, almost my peers came from China. Therefore, even now my English skill is still enough for daily use. Frankly, I did not consider seriously going back to university until 2010 because of encouragement and support from my former friends and family members. However, I found it was too hard for me to be involved in the university study nowadays. Compared with my Bachelor study in China, UTAS creates a more opening environment for students. For example, students could search for information online or in learning hub for projects under professor and some staff's instruction. Moreover, students could choose the elective units which they think is beneficial for them in future career; while in China, university staff's instruction is more like a rule, which students should never break it and must be loyal to it or professors would think such students are

“bad students”. Hence, with an age a little bit more than 30 this year and English insufficiency, I feel uncertain if I could finish my MA.

Besides two typical examples above, No.5, No, 18 and No.19 students gave similar feedbacks as them. They thought that poor English skills indeed made themselves lost in the loose learning environment in Australia universities and it seemed difficult for them to obtain positive views from professors in their academic performance. Hence, not surprisingly, negatives attitudes towards learning came out naturally during learning process for these Chinese international students.

Adaption to the intercultural environment

Australia is short for The Commonwealth of Australia, with a population of about 20,518,600, among which approximate 70 percent of people is English and Irish offspring, 18 percent is other Europeans' later generation and about 6 percent comes from Asian blood (Education Office, 2006). In Australia, although people come from different countries, the government advocates that everyone and each family should preserve their own religion beliefs, which shows respect and equality to the whole (Education Office, 2006). In Australian universities, students of diverse culture often make Chinese international students to be at a loss as to what to do due to their disadvantages of language - English. The following examples are from No.2 and No.7 students.

I think I am very shy to speak in front of other students and professors in the tutorial class because I have been got used to keep silent in Chinese schools and universities. Although, a lot of classmates and staffs tried to encourage me to speak more, I am still afraid of talking and doing presentation in front of them. Consequently, I usually sit in the back row, avoiding to be seen by professors. At the end of the first semester, most students did not remember my name and sometimes they refused to let me join in the study group. Even worse was that I could not understand some discussions between professors and classmates in class since the topic sometimes was about the religious issues. Take Christian for example, in China, most students are forbidden to talk religion in class and little knowledge could be got from families and schools. Hence, when they talk about Bible and church, I do not know what to follow.

---Student No.2

My problem is the language insufficiency leads me to have a feeling of unease while exploring in the research and experiments in the lab. In China, most professors would not ask any student questions directly because Chinese culture is euphemistic; while in Australia, if I could not express explicitly what I am short of at hand, the academic staff would be angry. Once, I was required to use a statistical method in my research project, but I did not tell him my shortage directly instead of asking him several questions. A week later, when professors asked me if the project went well I used broken English to express that I was not good at using that research method. After knowing it, the professors felt so stunned and angry. They thought that I should have mentioned it before otherwise they would not waste so much time on me.

---Student No.7

From these students' feedback, it is obvious to find out that language barrier indeed plays a vital role to hinder them to be assimilated into Australia culture. Chinese students could not shrug off the effects of Confucius whose values, beliefs and educational philosophy have been rooted in Chinese students' mind from childhood to adulthood (Bond, 1991; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Watkins & Biggs, 1996; Yao, 2000). Confucian teaching stresses the “Three Principle Relationship”, which explains explicitly the relationships between the subject and the sovereign, the son and the father and the wife and the husband, among which the sovereign, the father and the husband are superior to the subject, the son

and the wife (Wang, 1998). Thus, in Chinese educational environment, the relation between students and teachers is regarded as authoritative parents and obedient children, both of whose responsibility cannot be overstepped or they would be defined as “out of practice” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Therefore, proposing effective suggestions to help Chinese students to melt in new environment is essential and necessary.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As a large number of Chinese international students face the language problems of learning and living in Australia, suggestions focused on reforming Chinese traditional Exam-orientation English teaching and learning are proposed here, together with further exploration on TOEFL and IELTS language training in China, which needs further researching. In this paper, almost all participants had a qualification of sufficient language standard before enrolling. However, the reality is that they still think English as a language tool for academic and daily use is insufficient. To explore more on it, as mentioned above, one of the main reasons is that Confucian heritage of teaching and learning, but examinations, syllabus and materials production, teaching methodologies are called for reforming. Particularly, exam-orientation English teaching model brings potential negative influence on Chinese international students.

As we know, exams are very important in the Chinese context, which has been shown the high demand in Chinese educational system. For example, the Senior and Junior High Entrance Exam, the National University Entrance Exam, College English Bands 3-6, and TOEFL and IELTS. Although western universities require a minimum language test score before accepting international students, which aims to break language barriers, a large quantity of TOEFL and IELTS training schools are set up to help Chinese students who want to pursue their further studies in western world to pass the exams (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). During the language training, what the students only learn is the skills of getting a “satisfied score” in the exams instead of being taught how to practice and acquire communicative skills. Consequently, problems of faculty-student interaction, misunderstands of intercultural and academic learning issues will arise naturally. Many scholars note that communicative competence should be aroused more awareness for language teachers for its importance in teaching culture (Buttjes & Byram, 1990; Kramsch, 1995; Tickoo, 1995). In addition, Zarate (1993) believes that knowing how to relate to otherness is the essence of intercultural competence. Hence, teachers in training schools should introduce culture as part of teaching task language instead of only teaching tricks to make score satisfaction. Certainly, the assessment of TOEFL and IELTS tests also need further researching. TOEFL and IELTS tests are regarded as two widely authorized English language tests for non-native speakers who are eager to enter universities in United State and Australia universities (Feast, 2002), which both focus on four items as well, listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, because some test materials used come out every several months, Chinese international students could forecast and prepare qualified answers in advance. Although since April 1995, all test materials have been withdrawn in a year and more new versions in IELTS tests have been out for candidates, the estimation in writing and speaking module still exist (Charge & Taylor, 1996).

On the other hand, for Chinese international students, how to foster them a good learning habit and to enhance autonomous learning ability, from traditional teacher-centered to student-centered, should be taken into account. First, Chinese international students should realize acquiring knowledge is not only from classroom teachers but also from on-line resource, library resource, peer’s discussion and self-learning. Specifically, “a doubtful attitude” is necessary while learning and teaching, which promotes students’ English thinking ability. Then, intrinsic motivation will come up and work on individuals to enhance English learning ability (Freedman & Philips, 1985). Second, facilitating self-learning ability to

adapt to Australian university academic environment is another necessity for Chinese international student at this stage. Developing learners' autonomy benefits students a great deal, such as stimulating learning motivation, monitoring their own learning and adopting freedom of teaching materials, teaching process and activities (Powell, 1981). Meanwhile, learning autonomy, as learning and teaching strategy, enhances students' learning abilities to master knowledge actively rather than passively and physically. Lastly, there is a close relationship between students' confidence and learning autonomy ability. It shows that if academic achievements come from independent work by a means of self-learning, the excitement and a sense of pride can increase students' confidence in future learning, which also results in facilitating a strong will, creativity and enormous hungry for knowledge.

CONCLUSION

For the sake of absorbing essence from western countries, studying abroad indeed broadens Chinese international students' minds and provides more learning and working opportunities for them, but it is undeniable that more potential issues arise in terms of language insufficiency, which drives students to be frustrated in Australia. These problems, not only in university learning but also in social cultural environment, cause anxiety and uncertainty for Chinese international students. As Zimmermann (1996) points out one of the main factors on whether international students can be successful in academics is decided by a sense of cultural identification and a sense of belonging. It further claims that if the students cannot use English properly to interact with people, they definitely lose in interaction ship with staffs and professors. In specific, this paper shows Chinese international students' language inefficiency just occurs in failure of interaction between students and staffs in Australia universities, rational instructions of self-learning strategies and melting in intercultural academic environment.

The academic stressors have shown the conflicts of Chinese culture and Australian culture. The cultural shock thus speeds up reflection of education reform. In this research paper, the findings display that lacking qualified English skills prevent Chinese international students from successful interaction between faculty and students, adapting to new academic learning environment and understanding intercultural context, which are caused by Chinese traditional Confucian ideology, current exam-orientation teaching model and ignorance of culture input into language teaching materials. Particularly, those who teach language courses such as TOFEL IELTS in China are only for economic purpose instead of facilitating language practices to students. Hence, the researcher has proposed several suggestions in order to improve both English teaching and learning in future and aim to make Chinese international students realize that learning a language cannot accomplish at one stroke, if those only pursue a high score in TOFEL and IELTS, it certainly violates the nature of language learning.

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