Cultural adaptation of Asian students in Australia
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Abstract
In recent years, due to economic development and globalization, there is a dramatic increase of international students, mainly from Asian countries, coming to Australia and attending various courses, such as language courses, professional training and university degree. Not only do they contribute in substantial financial income, but also bring a diversity of cultures into this country. International students have become an important population group in Australia. While some students do not encounter any major problems in adapting to the new learning environment, others have difficulties in adapting to the educational system and the cultural discourse of teaching, learning, and living. Their psychological well-being is always a research focus for many educators, sociologists and psychologists. The data used for this study were drawn from interviews conducted at an Australian university. Thematic analysis was conducted with the use of Nvivo (qualitative data analysis computer software). The results indicate that emotional well-being is a very important factor in their well-being, particularly stress, fatigue, and loss of identity are the main cause of their problems. The paper suggests some strategies for Australian institutions to use in helping international students to deal with cultural shock.

Introduction
In recent years, more and more international students have come to Australia to study various courses. Not only do they contribute in substantial financial income, but also bring a diversity of cultures into this country. Thus, International students have become an important population group in Australia. Australian Education International (AEI, 2009) shows that in 2008 there were 543,898 enrolments by full-fee paying international students in Australia on student visas. This represents a growth of 20.7 percent on 2007 enrolments. Of these 543,898 enrolments international students, 33.6 % were enrolled in Higher education, this is an increase of 4.7 percent compared with the same
period in 2007. Australian Education International (AEI, 2009) statistics also show that in 2008, 79.1 percent of international student enrolments came from the Asian group and more than a quarter of international students were from China and other areas and countries with Chinese background, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.

Furnham and Bochner (1982) developed the “cultural distance” theory based on a large number of pilot researches. Their study found that the greater distance between the home culture and the host culture, the more cultural difficulty the overseas students would experience. For instance, British students studying in Australia would experience fewer difficulties than Chinese students studying in Australia. Therefore, it is more difficult for Asian students to adapt to the new life in Australia than those who are from a closer cultural background.

The educational transition for overseas students, to some extent, is a cultural transition (Alexander & Shaw, 1991). They have to deal with problems in their daily life so as to adapt to the new cultural environment. Based on a great deal of literature, international students are usually confronted with two categories of problems: academic problems and social problem.

In terms of academic problems, academic language, educational methodologies, prior academic preparation and curriculum content are the most significant problems that international students have to confront (Arthur, 2004; Liu, 2001; Mori, 2000). The language barrier is probably the most prevalent and significant problem for most overseas students (Mori, 2000). Inadequate English language skills usually decrease students’ ability to understand lectures, to take notes, to complete assignments and tests, and to communicate with other students and teachers in classes (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986). Additionally, unfamiliar educational methodology is another great difficulty for international students. When learning and teaching styles in the host country conflict with previous educational experiences, it will take a long time for overseas students to adapt to their new academic environment. For
example, active classroom participation is highly encouraged in most Australian universities, especially in tutorials, but most Asian students tend to be quiet in their classroom and take notes to be memorized in preparation for tests and exams (Mori, 2000). Also, Asian students view the teacher as an authority even a model, while in the eyes of Australian students, the teacher is a facilitator, organizer and friendly critic who promotes learner autonomy. The Asian Students’ role in the classroom is results-focused, learning by listening and reflection. In contrast, in the Western educational system, the learner is the centre of the whole educational process and they are encouraged to engage in independent learning, to question and develop critical thinking (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Besides, prior academic preparation and curriculum content also affect the level of academic adaptation of international students in the host country. Due to different educational backgrounds, there would be a gap between prior academic experience and the curriculum of the foreign educational program (Arthur, 2004). Students would feel stress in this demanding and challenging environment when they are deficient in their prior academic background, while feeling bored when their experience exceeds the knowledge of their studies. In addition, some curriculum content used in the classroom is derived solely from the host culture; therefore overseas students are not fully able to understand the meaning of host culture-based examples. Henceforth, they are unable to engage in class discussions, give valued feedback or make their own comments. Sometimes they may feel they are being excluded from the classroom and some students even feel like they do not belong in the local academic context (Arthur, 2004). Besides academic problems, international students have to face severe social problems in the process of cultural transition. Less family and friend support, deficient social communication competency, discrimination and racism are the main factors which increase student’s difficulties in adapting to the new environment. Relatively speaking, international students receive less family support than students who study in their home countries. They need to
become more independent to deal with issues in their own daily life. Also, international students are deficient in social communication competency, which is not merely language competency but also involves enough knowledge of the host “culture’s history, value and non-verbal norms” (Arthur, 2004, p. 38). Additionally, it is the first time for some students to confront racism due to a shift from being members of the majority race to a minority race (Arthur, 2004). Discrimination and prejudice from the host society would have a negative influence on international students’ psychological well-being (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2002).

In order to address the above-mentioned problems, a number of scholars have conducted research in coping strategies to solve problems or to reduce the negative impact on the well-being of international students. Coping strategies in pilot researches can be divided into two groups: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. As Folkmen and Lazarus (1985) state, problem-focused coping was more frequently used to deal with the sources of stress that are considered by the person as changeable than with those considered as unchangeable. Emotion-focused coping, contrastively, is more frequently used to deal with the sources of stress that are considered by the person as unchangeable than with those considered as changeable: “wishful thinking”, “distancing”, “emphasizing the positive”, “self-blame”, “tension-reduction” and “self-isolation” are typical strategies in this groups (Folkmen & Lazarus, 1985).

In further investigation, Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) conclude 4 categories of coping strategies, including a total 12 subscales.

1. Approach, which includes active coping, planning and suppression of competing activities.
2. Avoidance, which includes behavioral disengagement, denial, venting of emotions and positive reinterpretation.
3. Acceptance, which includes acceptance and restraint coping
4. Social support, which means seeking emotional and instrumental support.

**Aim and objectives of the study**

This exploratory qualitative study mainly aims to investigate the process of acculturation of Asian students in rural Australia, with a focus on the following questions:

- What kinds of cultural shock do Asian students experience in rural Australia?
- What are the differences in teaching and learning styles between Asian countries and Australia?
- What coping strategies have been used by Asian students used to deal with their study and lives in the new environment?

**Methodology**

This study is based on qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research has become an increasingly important approach and is broadly applied in various social sciences. Different from other research methods, qualitative research has its own characteristics. Generally speaking, qualitative research is naturalistic, pragmatic, interpretive, emergent and evolving (Marshall & Rossman, 2006)

In this study, an open-ended interview was conducted with five participants. Interviews, direct observation and written documents are three kinds of data collection in qualitative research methods. “Interviews yield direct quotation from people about their experience, opinions, feelings and knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Five international students, from Chinese backgrounds, participated in this study. The five participants included three female and two male, are currently first-year undergraduate students in University of Tasmania. Among them, two students are from China, one is Malaysian, one Singaporean
and one Thai. By way of explanation, the Thai students’ father is Chinese. The interviews were recorded with the participants’ approval and a list of questions had been sent to participants in advance of the interview. The interviewer asked follow up questions and elaborated based on the participants’ input. Data collected was analyzed by means of NVivo software.

Discussion and data analysis

Themes identified from the literature were included and were reflected in construction of the interview questions. By means of NVivo software, all the data was coded by free nodes and hierarchical nodes. Based on identified nodes and issues presented in the interview questions, the indentified themes include: cultural shock, differences in teaching and learning styles, and coping strategies.

Cultural shock

Cultural shock usually occurs in the process of cross-cultural interactions which international students experience when interacting with another culture that is little known. An increase in the differences between the native and host cultures will decrease international students’ understanding of the host culture and will increase their stress in the new environment. Due to both geographic and cultural difference, a majority of Asian students would be expected to encounter cultural shock in Australia. Furthermore, most Asian students lived in cities when they were in their home countries, so besides culture itself, they also have to adapt to country life in Australian rural areas. Additionally, some Asian students were from southern China or other Southeast Asian counties, it was problematic for them to adapt to the much colder weather. The participants elaborated on some phenomenon of cultural shock in their daily life in the Australian rural environment.

*The weather of Tasmania is too cold for me. I cannot survive without heater in the winter. Also, the weather is so dry that I got skin problems*
when I arrived here in the first month. (A Chinese-Thai student, June 2009)

There is much less entertainment activities than that in China. It is so quiet at night. And almost all the shops close after 6 p.m. or limited hours during weekends. However, there are many 24-hour shops here and there in China. (A Chinese student, June 2009)

Language barrier is probably the most obvious characteristic of culture shock. A majority of students agree that language is the greatest obstacle to successful acculturation. Here, language competence really means communication competence. Some Asian students get a higher score in English language tests, but they still find it difficult to communicate with local people in English. In fact, communication competence is the critical factor that determines the success of communication. Communication competence is not just language level but also includes enough knowledge of culture, history, value and non-verbal norms of the host society.

For me, language is the greatest difficulty in my daily life. I can’t communicate with local people fluently in English. Sometimes, I can’t understand what they said due to new words or something, but more happened is that I can’t understand the meaning behind the words. In our class, I often found local students laughing about a joke, but I didn’t understand the meaning of the humor even if I knew every word.

For international students, language is not only a tool of communication but also an important factor that can affect their academic achievement. In Australia, the official language of academic activities is English, so if students have deficient English ability, it is very hard for them to do well in their studies. Data from the participants shows that English is one of greatest difficulties for Asian students.

Due to low English level, I couldn’t fully understand what the teacher said in lecture at the first few months. Also, I couldn’t understand other local classmates talking about in tutorial. Since I couldn’t communicate with them, normally I kept silence in class. After class,
also due to limited English ability, I had to read academic literature for three or four times until I could fully understand. In assignment, I also got headache to express my opinions in good English.

Due to these problems encountered by students in the new environment, cultural shock is definitely associated with psychological difficulties such as anxiety, stress, confusion and a feeling of being lost or out of place. Data from the participants demonstrate that most Asian students felt lonely, homesick and depressed especially in the first few months when they just arrived or when they encountered difficulties in the process of adaptation. They normally show a loss of confidence, isolation from people, frustration, disorientation and loss of identity.

I felt so depressed when I just arrived here in the first month. Since I haven’t any friends in Australia, I have to deal with all problems by myself. I felt helpless when I was in face of difficulties. I remember the first day when I arrived here, I tried to call my family and informed them I had arrived safely, but I did not know I had to add international code before the telephone number if I call back China. I just tried several times, but I failed. I was so disappointed and helpless. At that time, I really realized I was staying in a strange nation, which is far away from my home country.

**Differences in education practice**

Due to different cultural backgrounds, there are great differences in the educational practices between Asian countries (especially China and some Southeast Asian countries with Chinese backgrounds) and Australia. These differences make it more difficult for Asian students to adapt to the new academic environment. Based on the data, the main differences can be summarized as follows: teaching and learning methods, teachers' roles in education practice and teaching technology.

In the aspect of teaching and learning methods, the most obvious difference is that apart from lectures, there are no tutorials in most Asian universities. Contrastively, lectures and tutorials are two basic academic activities in Australian universities. Additionally, Asian education, to some extent, is
characterized by examination-orientation, which means examination plays the most significant role in the assessment of students' academic achievement. In contrast, besides examinations, there are various means of evaluation to assess learning achievement, such as assignments, reports, reflection, and presentations, etc. in Australian universities. Therefore, students are normally evaluated by a comprehensive standard instead of a single-angle criterion. Furthermore, it is the exam culture in China or other Southeast Asian countries with Chinese-backgrounds that result in emphasis on memory and rote learning style. Comparatively, Australian students are not expected to memorize every point of knowledge in a subject since it is expected that critical analysis and problem solving skills are used and are greatly valued as the mark of an accomplished scholar.

_In Australia, examination is not the only means of evaluation on my study. Normally, the percentage of exam of the whole unit is 20-30%, which means that even if I failed the exam, I still have possibility to pass the units if I got higher score in assignments or presentation. However, in China, if I failed the final examination, I would definitely fail the unit._

In regard to the teachers' role in education practices, there is also a great difference between the two cultures. Asian students view the teacher as an authority even a model, while in the eyes of Australian students, the teacher is a facilitator, organizer and friendly critic who promotes learner autonomy. In the Australian educational system, the learner is the centre of the whole educational process and they are encouraged to engage in independent learning, to question and develop critical thinking (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Therefore, majority of Asian students are unaccustomed to this kind of independent learning activities, including library research, creative standard essays or term papers and discussion quizzes. Also, they probably feel shocked when students talk in class with their teacher in a manner of a friend, even call their teacher by their first name.

_When I write essays, I have to search related information as much_
as possible by myself. Sometimes, I found it is very difficult for me. In my home country, assignment normally base on text-books, so we needn’t to look for other information.

I found Australian student not respect their teacher. They call them by their first name, which is a kind of rude behavior in China. I remember when I first met my teacher, I called him “teacher”, but my teacher friendly introduce his first name to me and asked me to call him first name next time.

In the aspect of educational technology, the majority of Australian universities have WebCT (Course Tools) technology to facilitate teaching and learning. It is an online proprietary virtual learning environment system, used in many campuses for e-learning. To their WebCT courses, instructors can add such tools as discussion boards, mail system and live chat, along with content including documents and WebPages. It is an advanced platform for communication, which can integrate and share various teaching and learning resources with instructors and students. However, WebCT are rarely applied in Asian students’ home countries.

Apart from the above-mentioned three aspects regarding differences in teaching and learning practices between the two cultures, the data also explain a phenomenon commonly occurring among Asian students. Many instructors and even Asian students themselves find that they tend to keep silent in lectures, tutorials and other discussion activities. This sometimes results in misunderstandings between Australian teachers and Asian students. The interviews also discussed this problem and participants explained some reasons behind the phenomenon. Firstly, language is a great barrier that interferes with effective communication between teachers and students.

I normally keep silence in tutorial because I can’t fully understand what tutor and other students said. I desire to express myself, but sometimes after I know how to say in English, they have already changed another topic.

Secondly, curriculum content is another barrier to Asian students. Sometimes when the curriculum content is more emphasized on Australian cultural
features, such as history, customs or social values etc., Asian students have to keep silent since they have little knowledge about this kind of topic.  

*I remember in one tutorial in last semester, we talked something about Australian nursing policies or something like that. Since I haven’t any idea about this topic, I had to keep silent during the whole class.*

The last but not the least reason is cultural difference. In most Asian, modesty is valued as a virtue so that the majority of Asian students are modest and restrained. They would consider it is impolite to raise an objection in public. Consequently, language, curriculum content and cultural background are three main reasons why Asian students are not good at expressing themselves in some academic activities.

**Coping strategies**

In order to overcome above-mentioned difficulties they would encounter in the new environment, Asian students have to adopt various effective coping strategies to adapt to the new life in Australia as soon as possible. Effective strategies can help international students reduce the time of adaption and increase their well-being. The data from the research show that Asian students prefer these following strategies to deal with difficulties in the process of acculturation. These strategies are basically consistent with the previous literature.

**Action:** Positive coping strategies adopted by the majority of Asian students to deal with those problems they consider they could be solved if they took some effective action. The method belongs to problem-focused coping strategies categories.

*When I first started my study in Australia, I felt it was very hard to adapt to the new academic environment. Also, I was stressful for my course and I couldn’t fully understand curriculum content, so at that time I spent a lot of time to preview the content before class and review them after class. I also tried to find more information about this topic from other books, journals and internet when I did my assignment. Gradually, I get used to the teaching and learning*
Acceptance: Acceptance, one of the emotion-focused coping strategies, is frequently used to deal with some sources of stress that are considered by the person as unchangeable. In order to adapt to the new environment, sometimes international students have to accept the fact that they do not have enough ability to change. Acceptance can avoid facing the problems directly and provides more space for international students to think about the problems in an overall way. Some participants give responses to this strategy:

*In a new environment, it is definite we will meet various difficulties. Some can be solved and others can’t be solved. Hence, when we meet some difficulties we can’t solve, we have to accept it. Sometimes after accepting it, we probably found something good we didn’t see before.*

*When I first arrived, I frequently adopt acceptance strategy to deal with problems since I didn’t know how to solve them, but along with the time I stay in Australia get longer, I usually adopt positive attitude toward them and try to find effective strategies to solve them.*

Vent of emotions: Venting of emotions, one of emotion-focused coping strategies, means release of stress by the means of external methods. It is a frequent methods used by international students to relieve stress. Some participants mentioned this strategy in the interview and said that they consider venting of emotion can help them to eliminate anxiety in the process of adaption to the new environment.

*When I feel anxious or depressed, I usually take some exercises to eliminate stress. I remember last semester, before final exam, I was under a lot of pressure. I decided to do exercises everyday. After excises, I felt so relaxed and have more efficiency in my study.*

Social support: Social support is one of the most important strategies for international students to reduce stress in the process of acculturation. All participants acknowledge that friends play an essential role in their sojourn life. According to the data, friends and family are two main sources of social
support. Friends can provide support in both informational and emotional aspects. They do not only share useful resources and practical strategies but also provide emotional support, reducing depression and overcoming loneliness. However, it is worthy to point out that the majority of participants acknowledge that they have few local friends and they also agree that it is very hard to establish friendship with local people, so the majority are co-national friends.

*Friends are very important in my sojourn life. My friends help me deal with various difficulties in study as well as in life. Sometimes, I felt not so lonely when I have friends beside me.*

Besides friends, family is another essential source of support for international students. All of the participants place great emphasis on the importance of family in their sojourn life in Australia. However, the data demonstrate that unlike friends, family provides more emotional supports in their acculturation.

*I regularly call my family and enjoy talking with them. Although I know they can't help me deal with practice problems as I stayed at home country, but I still can obtain emotional support from them. It is valuable for me to overcome various difficulties in Australia.*

**Conclusion**

Since there has been an increased number of Asian students coming to Australia in recent years, more and more scholars and educational institutions have started to pay more attention to this special population group. This study, by means of qualitative research, analyzes the current situation of Asian students in the Australian rural environment from three aspects: cultural shock, differences in educational practices and coping strategies. Due to a greater cultural difference, Asian students confront more problems than other students who have closer cultural distance between home and host country. Also, in regard to educational practices, cultural differences are reflected in the following three areas: teaching and learning methods, teachers' roles in education practice and teaching technology. Aimed at these problems, the
study discusses some effective strategies to help current and future Asian students to overcome these difficulties and provides useful reference information for educators and related departments of government to understand cultural characteristics of Asian students so that they can offer more effective support to them.

Reference


