

Full Length Research Paper

‘Un-learning and re-learning’: The experiences of Chinese undergraduates in a first year management class in New Zealand

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The growth of China’s economy over the last two decades saw many Chinese students going overseas to study. Like many western countries, New Zealand benefited from increased international student enrolments, with Chinese students making up the largest proportion of the numbers. Many of these students experienced ‘culture shock’ in their new home, not the least being in their studies. To succeed, they needed to ‘unlearn’ many of their previous ways and adjust to new academic demands. The study reports the experiences of Chinese undergraduates enrolled in a compulsory first year management course where they encountered radically different ways of doing things; different styles of lecturing, group work, participative tutorials and an emphasis on application rather than textbook based study. Data for the study was obtained from observing lectures and tutorials, and from interviews with students and the lecturer. The findings illustrate the difficulties many Chinese students encountered; meeting written and spoken English requirements, dealing with challenging internal assessments, group work, participative tutorials and coping with very different lecturing styles. For many, the paper was a major hurdle to be overcome in studies.

Key words: International students, learning adjustment, language barriers, Internal assessment, socio-cultural pressure.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the Chinese economy over the last two decades saw many Chinese students going overseas to study. From 1978 to the end of 2008, the total number of Chinese students studying abroad was 1.3915 million (People’s Daily, 2009). New Zealand’s tertiary institutions benefited from the growth in international student enrolments, including Chinese students. By 2009, out of 93,505 international enrolments, 20,780 were Chinese (Ministry of Education, 2009). Many of the students were to experience ‘culture shock’ in their new home, not the least being in their studies. To succeed they need to ‘unlearn’ many of their previous ways and quickly adjust to new academic demands.

Studying overseas requires international students not only to adapt to a new culture but to adjust to different academic demands (Ward and Kennedy, 1993). The students’ ability to make the adjustment is dependent on a number of factors; their proficiency in both written and spoken English, their ability to cope with different approaches to teaching, moving from teacher-dependent to autonomous learner status, and handling a variety of socio-cultural pressures.

For many Chinese students, speaking and writing in English is an ever-present challenge. To study in New Zealand, international tertiary students must acquire an IELTS score of 6.0 but this in no way ensures that they are well prepared for their studies (Jepson et al., 2002). For Chinese students in particular, their difficulties are associated the way English is taught in China where “the Chinese EFL teacher.... adheres to the prescribed textbook,

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analyzing texts.... sentence by sentence....” (Wang, 2009: 247). The heavy emphasis put on written English often results in Chinese students’ spoken English not being well developed (Zhang and Brunton, 1999). Toyokawa (2002) see this as important, maintaining that the better the students’ English language, particularly their spoken English, the more effective the adjustment process will be. The reality is that in their studies, Chinese students experience considerable difficulty expressing themselves in the second language.

Chinese students also encounter a wider range of approaches to teaching than they have experienced in their homeland where the predominant mode is teacher-centered and teacher-directed lectures (Carter, 2006). In these situations they learn to “uncritically accept the instructor’s lecture or the fact in a textbook instead of presenting their own thoughts” (Zhao and McDougall, 2008: 64). Traditionally in China, teachers are held in high regard and seen as the providers of knowledge where the student’s role is to “obey, and not challenge; to listen, absorb and then regurgitate when asked” (Littlewood, 1996).

The Confucian culture within Chinese students have grown up, with its’ emphasis on harmony and co-operation lead students to “prefer not to speak out in open response to questions” (Guo and Zhang, 2004: 20). Challenging the teacher would be considered inappropriate and likely to lead to ‘loss of face” (Ministry of Education, 2001).

In sharp contrast, the learning environment that Chinese students encounter in the west tends to encourage learning which is “student-centered, meaning focused, competence-orientated and.... includes tutorials, workshops and/or seminars” (Zhou, 2008: 1). In this setting the teacher’s role is to “facilitate the student-student communication process through effective learning tasks” (Hu, 2010: 78). For Chinese students this is an unfamiliar role for the teacher.

Western education also places considerable value on learner autonomy and the acquisition of critical thinking skills which Holec (1981: 3) defines as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” Claxton (2002) maintains that autonomous learners are less likely to accept uncritically what they are told. In the New Zealand context, Harmer (2007: 396) maintains that students are encouraged to “take responsibility for their own learning”. Yi et al. (2008) and Camborne (1988) also argue that tertiary students are encouraged to be independent, critical thinkers and to value working collaboratively. Again, these are not the aspects of learning which Chinese students are familiar with.

The internal assessment that Chinese students encounter in western education is also new to them, particularly formative type assessments concerned with improving the processes and outcomes of learning (Blanchard, 2009). Such assessment encompasses all the activities undertaken by learners and teachers for enhancing the attainment of students and raising standards of

achievement (Black and William, 1998). This form of assessment is regarded as a powerful way for enhancing student learning (Wang and Lê, 2006).

Summative assessment by contrast takes place at set points, assessing students’ progress in achieving accepted criteria, for example tests. Chinese education relies heavily on this type of assessment where “academic success depends heavily on memorization and recall of class material” (Howson, 2002: 97).

Studying in a strange country can leads international students to experience stress. Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000) found that students who interact well with host nationals often reported decreased feelings of loneliness. Not only do Chinese students have to study in a language which is not their own, with assessments that are alien to them but they do this in a strange and often unwelcoming environment, which makes it difficult for them to settle and focus (McLaren, 1998). Their passivity in such learning situations often reflects their desire to avoid failure and not lose ‘face’. A sense of academic helplessness and disengagement occurs when students believe there is nothing they can do to avoid failing (Martin, 2010). A New Zealand survey of international students found that Chinese students had the lowest levels of life satisfaction and were least satisfied with their academic progress (Ministry of Education, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODS

Twenty-two Chinese first-year undergraduates were randomly selected from the 70 Chinese students enrolled in the course (Table 1). Participants came from 6 of the 10 tutorials operating in the paper.

Each student was approached at the beginning of the semester asking for their participation where it was made clear that data would be treated in strictest confidence and that no names would be used.

Data was obtained from three sources: interviews with the lecturer responsible for delivering the paper, observation of lectures and tutorials, and interviews with students. To gain an understanding of the Chinese students’ experiences, the researcher attended every lecture and selected tutorials. Attending tutorials provided the opportunity to observe Chinese students working in smaller groups. Issues that surfaced in the tutorials were followed up in the interviews. Being Chinese and Mandarin speaking enabled the researcher to develop a rapport with the students.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the 6th week of the semester when students had become fully engaged in the paper including completing assessments. The interviews lasted on average 60 min and were conducted in Mandarin so that students “would feel at ease in expressing their ideas in their own language” (Li et al., 2002: 140). Each interview was recorded and transcribed with the data being subjected to a thematic analysis with the aim of ‘identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

Observation of lectures and tutorials

The Chinese students soon discovered that lectures were very

Table 1. Composition of the sample.

Gender		Age		Years studying in New Zealand		
Male	Female	Under 21	22 to 23	1 year+	2 years+	3 year+
12	10	5	17	15	4	3

different from those they had attended in China; informal, fast-paced with the lecturer working from PPT slides. Rarely was the textbook referred to with students being expected to have read the material prior to the lecture. 'Class notes' were not used; instead, students downloaded the PPT slides or made their own notes on their laptops in the lecture.

Frequently, the lecturer would ask a student a direct question which for Chinese students was unusual. The lecturer also had a habit of asking students to take part in exercises or tasks in the lecture. For example, in one lecture, eight students, including two Chinese students were 'invited' to complete a task outside of the theatre. The group left the theatre to carry out the task which involved online research and preparation of a short presentation. On their return, the group presented their findings to the class and was applauded by the lecturer and class for their efforts. For Chinese students, this was a most unusual lecture.

In the smaller tutorials students were addressed by their first name and although the setting was less intimidating than the large lecture, the Chinese students still found participating in discussions difficult, hindered by the ever-present language barrier.

Interviews with the lecturer

The lecturer's approach to teaching the course guided by five principles: That the material should be relevant to the student's level and ability;

- 1) That students should be actively involved in the learning experience
- 2) That opportunities should exist for participation, for example in the tutorials
- 3) That students should find the material and the learning processes challenging
- 4) That assessment should be closely aligned with the teaching.

Interviews with students

While generally positive about the lectures, the Chinese students voiced familiar concerns;

"My listening skills are not adequate to understand the lecture. Sometimes I am unable to concentrate on the content....as a result I do not know what he said. (Participant 4)

"Mostly I can catch the lecture, although his style is different from Asian style, and so sometimes I cannot understand. But if I can't understand I can watch the video again after class". (Participant 6)

Tutorials were a new experience for the students calling for active participation which was worth 10% of their internal assessment marks;

"Mostly I can understand the purpose of the tutorial. But, sometimes, when the tutor mentioned some companies with which we are not familiar and some specialized questions, I am confused.... I am worried about it". (Participant 22)

Another commented;

"I am not used to discussing with my group members. I usually listen to their discussion. When they talk to me, they speak slowly

and try to let me understand what they discussed". (Participant 15)
Internal assessment was new to Chinese students who were more familiar with a single final examination;

"In China, I only had quizzes, mid-examinations, final examinations. My presentation competence was never judged. I studied by myself without participating in-groups. I think the assessment is very crucial". (Participant 20)

I feel the burden of many assignments. I have never experienced a group presentation and group report in China. I am afraid to present myself in class". (Participant 11)

"I feel great pressure from too many quizzes, final examination and too many assignments. Much more learning takes place outside of the classroom. I do not know how to study the paper independently". (Participant 2)

Group presentations were another major challenge;

"I am afraid of the presentation and reluctant to present myself, because of not only the lack of confidence in English, but also the lack of skills in practical presentation". (Participant 1)

DISCUSSION

The language barrier

The handicap of poor written and spoken English among international students is well documented (Campbell and Li, 2008; Li et al., 2002; Read and Hayes, 2003; Ward and Masgoret, 2004). For many students in the study it was a major barrier to their ability to fully engage in the course, for example tutorial discussions. Not only were they faced with mastering new material and adapting to new teaching approaches but they were also aware of the need to improve their English if they were to succeed. In one short semester, with the added pressure of passing the compulsory paper, this was an almost insuperable barrier for many of the Chinese students.

New forms of assessment

Chinese students faced a variety of new and challenging assessments, for example group-based presentations. Few had experienced group work or possessed the required skills, for example oral communication skills. The same was true of the case studies used in tutorials which few of the Chinese students had come across before. Written assignments were similarly challenging invariably asking for them to 'reflect' or to 'critically evaluate' theoretical material, terms they had not encountered before. In tutorials not only were they expected to take part in discussions but they were also being assessed on their participation. Even the traditional

examination provided little comfort where again they were asked to apply theoretical frameworks rather than simply being asked to regurgitate information from the text.

Socio-cultural pressures

Many of the Chinese students lacked confidence in their ability to pass the paper. They worried about being questioned by the lecturer and failing to have the 'right' answer. They worried about being seen as 'stupid' in front of their peers. And at all times their poor command of the English language simply compounded their concerns. They also worried about not being able to make a useful contribution to group work and negatively affecting their group's grade. Many of the Chinese students lived with a 'fear of failure' and the repercussions for themselves and their families.

Struggling to adjust

The literature can be criticized for taking a somewhat 'one-sided' view of the struggle of international students to adjust to their new surroundings, focusing generally on the need students to overcome their 'skill deficiencies' in order to meet the new academic demands. Less attention is given to the role of institutions in this academic adjustment process. Considerable attention has been given to pastoral care but less to academic adjustments on the part of the institutions to their new learners. In this study, the lecturer did include material which Asian, and particularly Chinese students, could associate with, for example case studies of New Zealand companies operating in China. Similarly inter-cultural material was also used and although tutors were familiarized with the educational and cultural background of Chinese students, none were Asian. In contrast, one tutorial in the course was ear-marked for indigenous, Maori students who made a much smaller proportion of the class than the international students.

Support was available to international students through a teaching and learning unit but unless directed by tutors, Chinese students were often reluctant to admit their short-comings and seek help. Doing so meant admitting that they were not able to meet the performance standards of the paper. When they did seek help it was often too late. Support was also provided at the end of the semester, targeted at the up-coming exams but this was not enough to overcome the problem of writing under exam conditions and international students it a hard course to pass.

In practice, the adjustment process appeared largely one-way. Having come to study in New Zealand, it was primarily the student's responsibility to 'adjust' to the new learning environment but to succeed, adjustments are also needed at the institutional level, for example in terms of the type of material and the delivery systems used.

Conclusion

For Chinese students the paper was a major challenge, where their poor command of English was a barrier to them making adjustments called for the short time available. The study suggests a number of ways which might assist Chinese students to make this adjustment.

Firstly, employing senior Chinese students, fluent in both Mandarin and English to act as 'mentors'. Having experienced the paper, they would be well placed to provide practical support for their fellow-Chinese.

Secondly, providing lecturers working with Chinese students with specific support, for example Mandarin speaking tutors or support staff.

The study suggests areas for future research including exploring the experiences of domestic students who interact with international students. With a significant part of assessment being group-based, what are the experiences of domestic students working with first year Chinese students?

Finally, investigating the experiences of academic staff, including tutors involved in teaching international students in large first year papers.

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