

# *Sojourners' Adaptation Process: Communication Factors to Succeed*

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## **Abstract**

This research tried to discover the factors influenced international students' adaptation to the new culture. The case study investigated international students – mainly consist of Asian origin students – studying in Western countries' universities, for instance USA, Australia, and the UK. The question was answered in accordance with, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, such as individualism-collectivism and power distance; and Gudykunst and Kim's anxiety-uncertainty management theory. In accordance with ethics issue, the research obtained data from secondary research through synthesizing key information from peer-reviewed journals. Factors which influenced the adaptation process were found to be language barrier – experienced by international students and host students; differences in cultural values – which posed some problems; and social interaction and coping strategy – in accord with Oberg's culture shock.

Keywords: international students, adaptation, cultural dimension, Asian students, culture shock

## **Introduction**

Human beings created culture and in return are defined by culture. Culture, according to Samovar and Porter (1994, 11) is a “complex, abstract, and pervasive matrix of social elements which functions as an all-encompassing form or pattern for living by laying out a predictable world in which an individual is firmly oriented.” Interculture is defined as the dialogue which happens between participants of two or more cultures. Dialogue means there is a process of communication which connects the participants. Cross-culture communication studying and comparing acts of communication which take place in a two ore more cultures. Communication by itself is an act of culture and culture is the essence of the communication act (Kress, 1988, p. 10).

In the realm of globalization, the immediate interaction between cultures is inevitable. Technology, economy, politics, and socio-cultural subjects have moved people from different nationalities closer. The process of intercultural communication continuously establishes and ‘enforces’ the participants to adapt to a new situation. International students, in particular, have been the active participants of cross-cultural communication, in the sense that they experience the diversity first hand.

As a migrant moving temporarily outside his/her country, the international student is the subject of changes. The changes range from the style of living, people with whom he/she meets to the process of studying. In this study, the researcher is interested in exploring the adaptation process of Asia-Pacific origin students in Western countries’ universities. It is interesting to investigate the communication process, focusing on differences in principal values such as power distance, saving faces, and uncertainty avoidances (Hofstede, 1997). The purpose of this study is to unravel, particularly, the communication process engaged in by the students and the host culture, the factors that enable the international students to cope with the new situation, and the difficulties or limitations they face in the communication process.

However, because of the restriction of time and inability of the researcher to conduct primary research, the researcher has pursued the answers through secondary research. According to Stewart and Kamins (1993, p.4) secondary research is the “re-analysis of data for the purpose of answering the original research question”. This research process enables the researcher to synthesize the extensive data provided by other researcher in the field. The use of secondary research benefits the project, in the sense that they provide the researcher with diverse views on the subject.

## **Research Question**

What factors influenced International Students Adaptation to the new culture ?

## **Method**

In conducting this project, the researcher obtained the source of information from **secondary research**. Secondary research is as important as a primary research. The documents can be a valid and reliable data from previous research – in the form of scholarly journal, unpublished thesis or dissertation, books, and other relevant resources – that support the reason, process and result of the primary research. In a case study, the abundant sources can provide thick description necessary for the analysis. Secondary data is also useful for the purpose of triangulation.

Triangulation, stated by Matthison (cited in Merrigan & Huston, 2004, p.50), is the process by which researcher using multiple data that correlate with the object of research, the data available from the same field of research (communication) or different field examination (e.g. psychology, education, and language), this method compensate the lack of other methods.

This particular investigation captured some findings from scholarly journals and scholarly texts, such as Howard Journal of Communication, Journals of Intercultural Communications, and Journal of Educations. As a communication research, the researcher found some answers from other related field of studies, such as education, linguistics, antropology, psychology, and economic. The abundant source of information are limited to the study which incorporated the process of communication. The researcher cross examined the various information, analysed and summarised key points from the reports. Secondary data was investigated in accordance with related theories, such as Cultural Dimension, Anxiety and Uncertainty Management theory and Culture Shock. The findings are the result of discussion, in this case, correlation and opposition between findings and the theories.

## **Analysis**

Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 234) suggests that there are three kinds of ‘strangers’ who experience a new culture; they are sojourners, refugees and immigrants. Each, she explained, varied in the adaptation process. Sojourners are people who stay temporarily in new culture,

while refugees and immigrants stay permanently. Sojourners, she continued, have a “transitional stay in a new culture as they strive to achieve their instrumental goals (e.g., international students...)” (p. 235). Refugees and immigrants, on the other hand, have to endure the acculturation process, in which they integrate new values and norms, and develop skills which are relevant to the new way of life.

Linda E. Anderson (1994) proposes a model of the cultural adaptation process which involves adjustments, learning, a stranger-host relationship, a continuing process, relativity, and the requirement of personal development from the sojourner (p. 303). Bochner and Furnham (cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 295) define cultural adaptation as “a process of learning the communication skill necessary for effective social interaction in order to overcome the verbal and nonverbal communication failures that are inevitable in a strange land”.

This part of the research will discuss the factors – obtained from the secondary research – which influence the adaptation process of international students with the new culture, giving emphasis on the process of communication. The findings are analysed inside the three main factors, which each will explain the sub factors inside.

### **The Language Barriers**

Language, according to Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2008), is one of the components of culture. Language defines how and what people think in a certain culture. International students have to learn to speak and write not in their own languages. They have to perceive their surrounding through other people language, which in any case might contain symbols or things that might not be said in their own language.

Ramsay found (cited in Andrade, 2006) that “first-year international students at an Australian university had difficulties understanding lectures in terms of vocabulary and speed, and with tutors who spoke too fast or gave too little input.” This statement highlights the importance of language as the basic of communication and learning process.

Senyshyn, Warford and Chan (cited in Andrade, 2006), revealed through their research that international students with higher score in TOEFL have had a better experience and positive perception in their first encounter with the new culture. These, however, are also determined by the way the students react at the learning incidents, anxiety and uncertainty they experienced. Campbell (2004, p. 117-118), support that result through her research that an international students who, prior to their arrival in the new country, have not passed the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test resulted in poor English and, hence, unable to

communicate with their home-stay families even for the simplest request such as what food they want to eat.

Moreover, accents or dialects of students' native languages also influence the English language they were using. Urban and Orbe (2007) in their research on international students in USA, found that a non-native accent of international students – however fluent their pronunciation were – affected how the native students regard them as fellow students, such an example was a South African student whose English was regarded as 'alien' for the host US American student. This perception was disconcerting for the non-native students in their effort to adapt. In contrast, Andrade (2006) summarized that even though language is one of the problem faced by international students, but it "may actually be culturally based ways of seeing the world."

These findings proposed the importance of language as a vital means of communication. Language consists of symbol, whose meaning shared by the community. Gudykunst and Kim underlined the assumption of communication as symbolic activity, "Symbols are not limited to words; they also include nonverbal displays and other objects (e.g, the flag)" (2003, p.5). Learning language means learning the culture as a whole, understanding concepts which available on a particular culture. This can become a problem for students whose culture might not recognized the same concepts as in the English language.

However, this barrier was also met by host students. In contrast, they have to change the style of speaking, alter them moderately and avoid informal language which might not be understood by international students. This can cause problem as the host students perceived the modes of communication as less rewarding and troublesome on their part (Dunne, 2009).

In general, language has become a particular problem, if not a gift for international students. The host countries are English speaking countries, which stress a good standard of spoken and written English. This was a particular problem in the findings. Because most International students were come from non-English background they have to make a major adjustments, such as changing the way and how they speak, which ultimately influence how they perceive the world. The problem in some cases become a blessing when the students aware of the importance of having to discipline themselves to learn the language and extra effort in academic.

### **The Difference in Cultural Values**

Hofstede's theory about cultural dimension, which underlines the individualistic versus collectivistic culture, has given some light in understanding the cultural adaptation of

international students. Research conducted by Lu and Hsu (2008) on international students' willingness to communicate found that willingness is influenced by several things, one of them is the difference in cultural values, such as Europecentric (individualistic) which emphasis explicit and direct style of speaking, and Asiacentric (collectivistic) value that stress' silence and harmony (p.85). American students are more keen on initiating and performing conversation than the Chinese students.

Nagao and Singhal (1993) found that assertiveness in communicating is viewed differently between American and Japanese students. The American students are more assertive than their Japanese fellow students, while American students tend to be active in engaging in conversation (even with the professor), the Japanese students felt obliged not to disagreed with their professor. Here, the collectivistic nature of Japanese culture encouraged the value of harmony, hence, even though Japanese has been influenced by American individualism, they are still reluctant in conducting assertive behaviors (p.13).

Other research on Korean as international students studying in Australia implies the similar finding. Korean students have a collectivistic cultural background, which put a stress on a power distance between young people and the elder and between teacher and students, however the relationship between teacher and students are developing gradually into deeper relationship like parents to their children. In this research, Choi (1997, p. 274) found that the Korean students were dissapointed by the Australian teachers' reaction, in terms of giving freedom on the students to think and work, and "some students perceived the academics as being defensive, unhelpful, indifferent or even discriminatory, while in turn they might appear to academic staff as over demanding, passive or dependent." Furthermore, in the UK, international Ph.D students experienced "differing cultural values and communicative practices (often in multilingual situations) influenced how they designed their research studies, conducted interviews and addressed ethical issues" (Robinson-Pant, 2009).

Previous research accomodated for this research accentuate the difference shown up through the encounter between individualistic and collectivistic culture. Concur with Hofstede (1997, p. 27) Asian students who represented the collectivistic culture show certain cultural aspect such as harmony and avoidance of conflict, study as a learning process of how to do something, and relationship over task completion. On the other hand, individualistic culture – represented by Australian teacher and American students – emphasizes on expressing themselves through verbal messages, education is a process of learning what to learn, and task oriented. Difference in cultural values can become problems, such as false perception from each participants toward each others, anxiety and the way they treat each

other. Bowe and Martin (2007, p.3-7) coincide by identified that misinterpretation of the message that can develop in the different aspects of communication with a new culture, such as are the nature of directness and indirectness in stating something, politeness, naming and stereotyping.

Overall, the cultural dimensions give comprehension on the implication of different cultural values on the intercultural interaction. Stereotype and prejudice can eventually arise, as a result of perception and misunderstanding. Problem occurred when tolerance is not in sight and misunderstanding about the different sign and symbol they displayed. In contrast, understanding from the host students that if international students were reluctant to speak directly was derived from cultural background, while at the same time international students considered the assertiveness and casual spoken word are basically rooted in their culture, give an ease on how they should communicate.

### **Social Interaction and Coping Strategy**

Interpersonal relationship is one of the factors influence the students' adaptation process. Its success and failures depend on some things such as preparedness (knowing important things before going into the field), expectation (surprised by the different nature of how things might happen), anxiety (an emotional reaction toward the surrounding), enjoyment/discomfort (enjoying new things and embarrassed at other things), communication (interaction, the problems encountered, and how to manage them), personality (each person has specific characteristic which influence the interaction), and cultural influence (different cultural background) (Chen and Isa, 2003, p.75-96).

In interacting with the new culture and people with different culture (or nation), Tan and Goh (2006, p.656) found that Asian and Australian students chose to mingle with their peers from the same country, and thus, resulted in the feeling of in-group and out-group. The Asian students consider Australian students as an out-group and inhibit communication process, so did the Australian students. Furthermore, Tan and Goh concluded that interpersonal relationship carry some cultural values which are different between Asian students and Australian (Western) students. In building relationship, many Chinese, Singaporean and Malaysian students perceived reciprocal and sincerity as important and only few of the Australian students (8%) in the research think the same.

Pederson, Tkachuk and Allen (2008, p.195-196) conducted a research on McCroskey's communication apprehension ("an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons")

experienced by American and Indian students in their interaction. The finding concluded that with the frequent encounter on certain communication situation (such as public speaking, group discussion, etc), the lesser the possibility of the participants to experience communication apprehension in the future. The thought that considers communication as important also support the communication interaction.

The frequent encounter between international students and host students, in some way, can create a chain of friendship. Kudo and Simkin (2003) discovered that the friendship formation which happens – at the initial contact between international students and host students – was caused by propinquity and appropriate self disclosure. The participants of the relationship can become friends when a proper interactions with elements such as openness, perceiving others as unique, and emotional aspect are present. In contrast, engage in conversation with a ‘stranger’ – in this case between international students and host students – with a high degree of self disclosure is deem as inappropriate (Weisel & King, 2007).

Furthermore, Brown and Holloway (2007) excerpt some of the problem or stress met by international students at initial stage of adapting such as nervousness, feeling adrift, excited, homesick, depressed, dissatisfied, loneliness, stress and inability to sleep. This finding goes in-line with Oberg’s concept of culture shock (cited in Ward, Bochner, and Furnham, 2001, p. 80) which comprises of, honeymoon, a phase of enjoying the initial experience; the crisis, feeling of insufficient with him/herself; the recovery, the sojourner have resolving the crisis and learning the culture;and the adjustment, this is the phase when sojourner enjoy the experience and has a cultural competence.

In order to survive, international students should be able to conduct certain coping strategies. Those strategies are but not limited to, discover cohesion with ‘others’ (Urban & Orbe, 2007), friendship with the host students (Andrade, 2006), reminding themselves of the main motivation or the push and pull factor of their study (Ichimoto, 2004), and having a good interpersonal social support (Ye, 2006). These coping strategies associated with the anxiety-uncertainty management theory by Gudykunst and Kim (2003, p. 338-339), in managing uncertainty the participants should increase intercultural friendship, while managing anxiety by developing trust for others.

In the process of adaptation, then, the concurrence of interpersonal encounter and relationship are important factors. Moreover, the findings highlighted the needs of international students to be prepared prior to the encounter, open to socialize with the host culture and be appreciative of the cultural differences. The findings also outlined the



importance of acceptance from the host culture and two way communication between the participants. This means, the adaptation process is influenced by both party involved.

Bustan, Vidyarini, Lim and Adiasih (2014) conducted a research on the Peacebuilding Process by Participants of International Community Outreach Program. They found that pre-education about the host culture prepared the students to interact with the new atmosphere, it gave opportunity for tolerance to appear. They also found that the participant's mindset, that cultural differences might appear, helped the adaptation process to gone smoothly.

### **Conclusion**

The research concluded that the factors influenced international students' adaptation process are language, differences in values, and social interaction. Nevertheless, this research has some flaws, as the findings were acquired through secondary research. It is only able to answer the question in broad terms, unspecified case and produce bias, such as only revealing Asian students versus Western origin students. This research only captured a small part of the adaptation process, can not explain the specific style of adaptation process and can not provide further recommendation for adaptation process as the case study is really broad. However, through this study the researcher hopes to give a glimpse of the findings that can be taken into account into conducting primary research that can reveals more thorough results. Nonetheless, there are several questions to be asked from these findings such as, whether the long duration of relationship can assure that adaptation process is succeed? Or does each student has the same method of building relationship? These questions can be researched with a primary research.

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