

Learning Experiences of Chinese Background International Students in an Australian Tertiary Context

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Abstract

Educational practises could be more or less regarded as the reflection of their culture(s). Since there are great differences between eastern and western culture, educational practises in these two cultural contexts are considerably different. Most Chinese background students cultivated in eastern educational contexts are sure to experience difficulties when they have transitioned to a western academic environment. This paper reports a recent study which aims to investigate the learning experiences of Chinese background students in an Australian university. A mixed method approach, which involved both quantitative and qualitative method, was utilises to collect and analyse data. Snowball sampling was used for the participant recruitment. A 42-item questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, and semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data. The quantitative data were analysed by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) version 16, and the qualitative data were analysed by NVivo version 8. The findings discovered in the data analysis showed that English language ability was highly emphasised by almost all Chinese background students. Also, there are indeed cultural differences influencing western and eastern educational styles. Lastly, most Chinese background students used positive coping strategies, and highly valued the support from universities.

1. Background

Due to economic development and globalisation, the number of international students studying in Australia has been increasing dramatically in recent years. Chinese background students have always been the main source of international students. According to Australian Education International (AEI, 2010), in 2009 there were 631,935 enrolments by full-fee paying international students in Australia on student visas. Among these international students, 76.5 percent of them came from Asian countries and more than a quarter of them were from Mainland China and other countries/regions with a Chinese background, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan,

Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, etc.

There are many motives and aims of international students who are studying abroad, such as “culture learning”, “personal development” and “academic accomplishment”. Most of them have excessive concerns and place extreme demands on attaining of academic excellence. (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007, 2008). As a result, education-related problems are of major concern to these international students (Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003).

Apart from this, educational transition is considered to be a cultural transition for most overseas students (Alexander & Shaw, 1991). That is, they face difficulties in adapting to the unfamiliar learning and teaching discourses caused by cultural differences.

Furnham and Bochner (1982) developed the “cultural distance” theory based on a large number of previous literature. They find that the greater distance there is between the home culture and the host culture, the more cultural difficulties overseas students would experience. For instance, British students studying in Australia might experience fewer difficulties than Chinese background students studying in Australia. In other words, it is more difficult for Chinese background students to adapt to Australian environment than those who are from a closer cultural background.

Hofstede’s cultural differences models (Hofstede, 1980, 1986, 2007; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) measure cultural characteristics in the five dimensions: Power Distanceⁱ, Individualism/Collectivismⁱⁱ, Masculinity/Femininityⁱⁱⁱ, Uncertainty Avoidance^{iv}, Long-term Orientation/ Short-term Orientation^v. According to this theory, the Chinese culture is characterised by the highest power distance among all the 40 countries surveyed. It is high on collectivism and low on individualism. It also indicates weak uncertainty avoidance, “medium” masculinity and long-term orientation. Contrastively, the Australian culture has low power distance. It is high on individualism with more tendencies to uncertainty acceptance and short-term orientation. Hence, it is believed that the Chinese culture is almost opposite to the Australian culture.

To some extent, cultural differences affect educational systems. Hofstede’s (2007; 2005) five dimension models were implicated into the comparison of educational systems. His findings support the argument claimed by Kennedy (Kennedy, 2002) that the way of acquiring knowledge and skills are various according to different cultural criteria. Hofstede (2007; 2005) argues that in nations with small power distance, the education system is students-centred and the relationship between teachers and students tends to be informal. In contrast, in nations with large power distance, educational systems are more hierarchical and formal. Moreover, in collectivistic cultures, confrontations and conflicts between teachers and students are avoided in order to maintain classroom harmony, while in individualistic cultures,

students are encouraged to show their individualities. In nations with feminine culture, students are characterized by mutual solidarity and less open competition, whilst in nations with masculine culture students are more openly competitive.

Furthermore, in terms of uncertainty avoidance, high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to consider open disagreement with fellow students, and especially with teachers, as personal disloyalty. However, in low avoidance culture, students feel comfortable studying in an unstructured learning situation, and do not consider public disagreement or contradicting teachers to be inappropriate behaviours. Lastly, students in long-term orientation nations tend to attribute efforts to the source of academic failure or success, while in short-term orientation nations, students tend to look upon success as a result of chance. Since there is a wide distance between the Chinese culture and the Australian culture, their respective educational system is sure to be largely different. This theory is supported by other studies (Kennedy, 2002; Samovar & Porter, 2004).

Hofstede's cultural difference model, as an important theoretic foundation, provides "a highly valuable insight into the dynamic of cross-cultural relationship" (Jones, 2007). However, there are still a few criticisms against such a ground-breaking body of work. One of the most popular criticisms is cultural homogeneity, which argues that most nations are composed of groups of ethnic units instead of an homogenous unit. Therefore, Hofstede's research is criticised as ignorance of the variations of the community (Smith, 1998). Another criticism is national divisions. McSweeney (McSweeney, 2000) argue that nations are not the proper units of cultural analysis to identify and measure cultural difference since cultures are not necessarily bounded by borders. Therefore, literature review shows that there are still contradiction in Hofstede's cultural difference model.

Besides educational systems, language barriers are another prevalent and significant problem encountered by most overseas students (Mori, 2000), especially for some Chinese background students who often have little practise in using English language in their home countries (Liu, 2001). The language barrier has adverse effects on students' academic performances (Mori, 2000). Inadequate English language skills may decrease students' ability in understanding lectures, taking notes, completing assignments and tests, as well as communicating with other students and teachers in classes (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986). Also, lack of language proficiency is obstructive to communication, which makes them feel reluctant to participate in class discussions (Lin & Yi, 1997). These difficulties can easily lead to academic failure, which is main reason for shame and depression among students from certain cultural backgrounds (Chen, 1999).

Consequently, unfamiliar educational systems caused by culture differences and lack of language proficiency are seen as two salient education-related problems encountered by Chinese background students. Universities are regarded as one of

the essential support sources in helping students overcome these problems (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Many Australian universities have established service offices to provide international student with extra assistances, such as orientation programs, and peer support programs, etc. (Jenkins & Galloway, 2009). However, Sawir et al. (2008) find that only few students benefit from the support of university staff as not all international students know about the services available, especially in the early stay of their study.

This study aims to investigate the perceptions and challenges encountered by the Chinese background students within an Australian tertiary context. It examines the influences of two main factors, English language and cultural differences, in these students' learning practices as well as the role of universities and faculties in supporting these students' learning. The participants were also invited to share both positive and negative experiences they had at the initial stage when they first came to Australia.

3. Methodology and participants

This study is in a mixed method research paradigm which utilises both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyse data. A Chinese background, in this research, is defined as being of Chinese nationality or Chinese ethnicity, or speaking Chinese as a native language. Fifty Chinese background students responded to the questionnaires and twelve of them participated in follow-up interviews. These participants are from different Chinese backgrounds, including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Snowball sampling was used for the participant recruitment. Firstly, a 42-item questionnaire was sent out to collect quantitative data, which provided the researchers with a general idea on the participants' views, perceptions, understanding and expectations in relation to studying in Australia. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data which provided the researchers with explanatory information and permitted a deep understanding of the Chinese background students' learning difficulties and the role of universities in their study. The interview questions and schedule were prepared in advance according to the themes emerged from the responses to the questionnaires and the elements mentioned by relevant literatures. The interviewer asked follow-up questions and elaborated based on the participants' input. The quantitative data was analysed by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) version 16, and the qualitative data were analysed using NVivo version 8. The following sections will introduce the results of both the quantitative and the qualitative data analysis with an emphasis on the quantitative findings.

4. Findings

The questionnaire was composed of 5 sections, including demographic information

of participants (11 items), significance of English language competence (6 items), influences of cultural differences (4 items), self-adjustment (16 items) and the role of support strategies from faculties and universities (6 items). Apart from the questions in the first section, all the questions are formatted in a Likert-scale format. The strengths of respondents' feeling for each statement was identified on a five abbreviation scale, e.g. SDA=Strongly Disagree; DA=Disagree; NS=Not Sure; A=Agree; SA=Strongly Agree. The participants were asked to choose only one answer for each item.

4.1. Significance of English language competence

The first scaled section (Q12-17) aims to investigate the Chinese background students' views on the significances of English competence in their study. Table 1 below is the participants' responses to these six questions:

QUESTION ITEMS	N=50, MISSING DATA=0			
	Median (Me)	Mean (M)	95% CI for M	
			Lower	Upper
Q12. English ability is essential for my study at university.	5	4.76	4.64	4.88
Q13. My academic achievement is greatly influenced by my English ability.	4	4.28	4.04	4.52
Q14. Sometimes it is hard for me to express my ideas with English.	4	4.16	3.89	4.43
Q15. I can not fully understand the lecturers' words in the lecture.	4	4.06	3.78	4.34
Q16. Seeking ways to improve my English language is important.	4	4.34	4.15	4.53
Q17 The first 6 months of my academic study was the hardest period due to my limited English language abilities.	4	3.42	3.13	3.71

Table 1: Descriptive statistic results obtained by participants' responses to Q12-Q17; Mean/Median scored on Likert-scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree.

According to Table 1, the medians of all the items are greater than or equal to 4, which indicates that most participants hold positive views toward all the questions in this section. The significance of English language competency was highly valued by these Chinese background students (Q12 and Q13). However, due to their limited language ability, they experienced difficulties in the first six months of their academic

study (Q17), due to difficulties in understanding lectures and expressing opinions with English language (Q14 and Q15). Therefore, finding an effective way to improve their English is considered to be very important (Q16). The data analysis from this section shows that English language proficiency plays an essential role in these Chinese background students' learning practices. This is also evident in one participant's responses to the interview questions:

I came to Australia two years ago. The first two months was the hardest time because I could not understand the lectures. Although I had a very good score in the language test before I came, it was still hard for me. It takes time to get used to the learning environment here. However, things are not always bad because after six months my English language was very much improved and I started to make progress in my study.

A student from Mainland China

4.2. Influence of cultural differences

The following section (Q18 to Q21) is regarding the influences of cultural differences on the Chinese background students' learning practices. Table 2 below is the participants' responses to these four questions:

QUESTION ITEMS	N=50, MISSING DATA=0			
	Median (Me)	Mean (M)	95% CI for M	
			Lower	Upper
Q18. I only had lectures but no tutorials in my own country.	4	3.32	2.94	3.70
Q19. It is good to keep quiet in the classroom in my own country.	4	3.70	3.35	4.05
Q20. I always exchanged my ideas with teachers and other fellow students in my class.	3	2.92	2.63	3.21
Q21. I only follow the teachers' instructions, and never tell them my ideas.	3	3.10	2.96	3.24

Table 2: Descriptive statistic results obtained by participants' responses to Q18-Q21; Mean/Median scored on Likert-scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree.

Table 2 indicates that there are indeed cultural differences influencing the Chinese background students' learning styles. Most of the participants confessed that there is no tutorial in the traditional education practices in their home countries (Q18), and also they tended to keep quite in the classes in their home countries (Q19). As a participant from Hong Kong discussed "The classroom environment is very different,

I am not used to ask a lot of questions in the class or criticize what has been told by the teachers.” However, there are divided opinions on Q20 and Q21 which focus on their behaviours in Australian academic contexts. Therefore, further analysis was conducted to identify factors that affect their views on these two questions. The result is shown in Table 3 below:

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS	MEANS	
	Q20. I always exchanged my ideas with teachers and other fellow students in my class.	Q21. I only follow the teachers' instructions, but never tell them my ideas.
Gender		
Male	3.08	3.04
Female	2.75	3.16
Age		
16-24	3.08	2.58
25-35	2.77	3.19
Length of stay		
Less than 12 months	3.00	3.67
Over one year to two years	3.04	3.14
Over two years to four years	2.94	3.12
Over four years to six years	-	-
Over six years	2.43	2.57
Chinese background		
Mainland China	2.85	3.08
Hong Kong	3.25	1.75
Taiwan	2.00	2.00
Malaysia	3.40	2.60
Degree currently doing		
Certificate/Diploma	2.20	2.00
Bachelor degree	3.05	2.55
Master degree	3.07	3.20
Doctoral degree	4.00	4.00
Others	3.00	2.40

Table 3: Responses' means to Q20 "I always exchanged my ideas with teachers and other fellow students in my class" and Q21 "I only follow the teachers' instructions, but never tell them my ideas"

According to Table 3, male and younger students tended to express their opinions in classes, but female and mature students tended to keep silent and follow the teachers' instructions. Students who have been in Australia for one year to two years had the highest number of response to exchanging ideas with teachers and other fellow students. However, students who have been in Australia for less than 12 months tended to keep silent and follow the teachers' instructions. In addition, the Malaysian Chinese background students had the highest number of responses to communicating with teachers and other fellow students. However, students from Taiwan and Mainland China had relatively lower responses to this item. Students from Mainland China also tended to keep silent and follow the teachers' instructions, but Hong Kong students preferred to express their own opinions in classes. In terms of degree currently pursuing, doctoral students had the highest number of responses to exchanging ideas with others, but students who are studying certificate or diploma had the lowest number of responses. Also, doctoral students had the highest number of responses to following teachers' instructions, but students who are studying certificate or diploma also had the lowest number of responses on this statement.

4.3. Adjustments made

Q22 to Q36 were regarding the adjustments made by the Chinese background students to overcome the difficulties and challenges in their study. The results are shown in Table 4 below:

QUESTION ITEMS	N=50, MISSING DATA=0			
	Median (Me)	Mean (M)	95% CI for M	
			Lower	Upper
Q22. I sit in front of the lecturer so that I can understand the lecture better.	3	3.14	2.81	3.47
Q23. During tutorials, it is important for me to participate.	4	3.86	3.86	3.62
Q24. When giving presentations, I prepare as fully as possible.	4	4.06	3.87	4.25
Q25. When giving presentations, I practice as many times as I can.	4	3.88	3.63	4.13
Q26. If I have problems with my assignments, I will ask my lecturer.	4	3.64	3.39	3.89

Q27. If I have problems with my assignments, I will ask my fellow students.	4	3.88	3.67	4.09
Q28. I ask others to check my written work.	3	3.06	2.74	3.38
Q29. When I write my assignments, I try to read as many books as I can.	4	3.60	3.36	3.84
Q30. When I write my assignments, I try to read as many journals as I can.	4	3.66	3.41	3.91
Q31. When I write my assignments, I try to search the internet for information as much as I can.	4	4.14	3.91	4.37
Q32. MyLO, the online learning support system provided by the university, is useful for my learning.	4	3.66	3.40	3.92
Q33. Before I take a test, I try to memorize everything that might be covered.	4	3.88	3.66	4.10
Q34. Before I take a test, I try to prepare as fully as possible.	4	4.10	3.93	4.27
Q35. I put in more time to study in a few weeks before final examinations.	4	4.16	3.95	4.37
Q36. I study during the weekends to catch up the time lost.	3	3.10	2.79	3.41

Table 4: Descriptive statistic results obtained by participants' responses to Q22-Q36; Mean/Median scored on Likert-scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree.

According to Table 4, among the 15 items, the medians of 12 items are equal to 4. This means that these Chinese background students had positive responses to these items. It also suggests that most of the Chinese background students had adopted positive strategies to overcome the difficulties occurred in the new academic environment. For example, they tried to make better preparation for presentations (Q24 and Q25) and examinations (Q34 and Q35), seek support from lectures and other fellow students (Q26 and Q27) and access to more information from books (Q29), journals (Q30) and the internet (Q31). Also, these students highly valued the importance of tutorials (Q23) and the online learning support systems provided by the university (Q32) in their study. This is further evident in one students' interview responses:

I guess there is a huge difference between the local students and us (international students). It is hard for us to get a high mark on our

assignments because the limitations in our language. I spend around 16 hours to do a lot of preparation for assignments and exams. Apart from working hard, I also ask for support from different sources, such as lecturers, other students, language assistant at the university.

A student from Mainland China

As the students' views on the other three items (Q22, Q28, and Q36) are divided, further analyses were conducted and shown in Table 5.

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS	MEANS		
	Q22. I sit in the front of the lecture so that I can understand the lecture better.	Q28. When I finish my written work, I ask others to check so that I can improve.	Q36. During the semester, I study during the weekends to catch up the time lost.
Gender			
Male	2.96	2.62	2.73
Female	3.33	3.54	3.50
Age			
16-24	2.96	2.71	2.92
25-35	3.31	3.38	3.27
Length of stay			
Less than 12 months	3.67	3.00	3.00
Over one year to two years	3.22	2.78	2.96
Over two years to four years	3.12	3.41	3.24
Over four years to six years	-	-	-
Over six years	2.71	3.14	3.29
Chinese background			
Mainland China	3.18	3.05	3.08
Hong Kong	2.75	3.00	3.25
Taiwan	3.00	4.00	2.00
Malaysia	3.32	3.00	3.40
Degree currently doing			
Certificate/Diploma	3.20	4.00	2.60
Bachelor degree	3.35	2.90	3.00
Master degree	3.00	2.80	3.20
Doctoral degree	3.50	3.60	4.00

Table 5: Responses' means to Q22 "I sit in the front of the lecture so that I can understand the lecture better", Q28 "When I finish my written work, I ask others to check so that I can improve" and Q36 "During the semester, I study during the weekends to catch up the time lost".

Table 5 indicates that the female and mature students had a higher number of responses on the three items: sitting in the front of the lecture, asking others to check their assignments and studying during the weekend. Also, the Malaysia students and the students who have been in Australia for less than 12 months preferred to sit in the front of lectures. Doctoral students also have a higher number of responses to this item. Three groups of students, including students from Taiwan, students who have been in Australia for two to four years, and students studying certificate or diploma, had the highest number of responses to asking others to check their assignments. Lastly, Malaysian students, students who have been in Australia for more than six years, and doctoral students preferred to study during weekends.

4.4. Support from faculty and university

The last section (Q37 to Q42) investigates the role of support from faculties and universities. The Chinese background students’ responses to these questions are introduced in Table 6 below:

QUESTION ITEMS	N=50, MISSING DATA=0			
	Median (Me)	Mean (M)	95% CI for M	
			Lower	Upper
Q37. My teachers give me extra help to my studies.	4	3.32	3.06	3.58
Q38. Administration staff is helpful to my studies.	3	3.02	2.77	3.27
Q39. My teachers treat me as fairly as other students	4	3.70	3.49	3.91
Q40. My teachers treat me equally to local students.	4	3.50	3.21	3.79
Q41. The university tries its best to help my study.	4	3.38	3.14	3.62
Q42. Extra language support on my assignments and tests is preferred.	4	3.98	3.75	4.21

Table 6: Descriptive statistic results obtained by participants’ responses to Q37-Q42; Mean/Median scored on Likert scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree.

According to Table 6, most of the Chinese background students highly valued the support provided by their universities. The assistance includes support from academic staff (Q37), being treated fairly and equally by lecturers (Q39 and Q40) and extra language and assignment support from the universities (Q42). This can also be seen from some participants’ responses in the interviews. It is argued that most lecturers take their difficulties into consideration and provide them with support

and encouragement. However, there are also some lecturers who believe the international students should not get extra help with their assignments as they should have the ability to complete tasks independently if they choose to study in Australian universities. In terms of support from administration staff, there are divided views among these students. Therefore, further analysis was conducted to identify factors that affect their views on this item.

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS	MEAN
	Q38. I am satisfied with admin staff in the university
Gender	
Male	2.85
Female	3.21
Age	
16-24	3.00
25-35	3.04
Length of stay	
Less than 12 months	3.00
Over one year to two years	2.91
Over two years to four years	3.18
Over four years to six years	-
Over six years	3.00
Chinese background	
Mainland China	3.05
Hong Kong	2.50
Taiwan	2.00
Malaysia	3.40
Degree currently doing	
Certificate/Diploma	2.60
Bachelor degree	2.95
Master degree	3.20
Doctoral degree	4.00

Table 7: Responses' means to Q38 I am satisfied with admin staff in the university

Table 7 shows that female, mature and students who have been in Australia for two to four years had more positive evaluations on the support provided by administration staff. Malaysian students also had a more positive response on this item than the students from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Doctoral students had the most positive view on the support given by administration staff than students who were pursuing other degrees or diploma.

Generally speaking, the language barrier and cultural differences emerged as the two largest challenges for these Chinese background students. Compared to the students from Malaysia, the students from Mainland China had larger difficulties in using English language due to the lack of practice in their home country. This is supported by Liu's (2001) study which reveals that lack of practice is the main reason of Asian background students' language barrier. Moreover, apart from the difficulties and challenges, the participants also shared some exciting and positive experiences in relation to their study and life in Australia. However, these experiences are mostly mentioned by students in their very initial stage of arriving (within approximately 3 months) or after staying in Australia for more than two years.

Lastly, expectations were also given by the Chinese background students. It is argued that having a good mark on English language test does not necessarily translate to success in learning. Therefore, these students need considerations and understandings of their lecturers and faculties to support them in the adaption of the new environment. More communication is desired by these students. It is suggested in this study that lecturers provide opportunities for all international students, including the Chinese background students, to share their concerns, solutions and expectations. In this way, a platform can be built for this particular student group to support each other. Also, lecturers should allow time in the tutorials and after lectures for the students to ask questions. Hence, the students who are shy to speak in front of the whole class can have an opportunity to ask their questions. In one word, these two recommendations can be taken into consideration by faculties and universities in creating more meaningful and inclusive learning environments for future international students including Chinese background students.

5. Conclusion

Due to the differences in language, culture, and educational systems, Chinese background students studying in the Australian university context, experience various difficulties. This study investigated Chinese background students' views and experiences in Australia, with focuses on two factors, language barrier and differences in educational practises. Conclusions were drawn based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The findings indicate that most of the Chinese background students have adopted positive strategies to adjust and adapt to the unfamiliar academic environment. Also, they have a positive feedback to the support they get from their universities. It is worthy to note that this study takes the students' demographic characteristics into consideration in examining these students' perceptions and has obtained some valid findings, which could be used as reference for further research.

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- ⁱ. Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of a society or organizations expect and accept unequal power distribution within the group. People from high power distance countries would more respect superiors, thus it is hard for them to criticise authorities in public, while low distance power people have little difficulty in contradicting their superiors.
- ⁱⁱ. In the collectivist society, the bonds between the individual and the group are strong, and harmony is valued more than honesty and truth. Contrastively, in individualist society, the bonds between the individual and the group are loose and the individual is more independent from their in-group.
- ⁱⁱⁱ. In masculinity versus femininity dimension, Hofstede describes the distribution of gender role, no physical characteristics, in the country. The male role is characterized by assertiveness and competition and it has been called "masculine", while the female role emphasizes modesty, tenderness and nurturance and has been called "femininity". If the country has high masculinity scores, it means the gender role is very distinct, whereas if the country has high femininity scores, it means the gender role overlap.
- ^{iv}. Uncertainty acceptance dimension is used to measure to what extent people "feel threatened towards situation they perceive as uncertain, unstructured or unknown. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the uncertainty possibility by strict rules and laws, security and safety measures, and on the philosophical and religious level only one absolute truth will be believed. Contrastively, uncertainty acceptance cultures are more tolerant of different opinions; they have as few rules as possible; and philosophically and religiously, they prefer relativism and accept many currents existing.
- ^v. Long-term or Short-term orientation dimension related to people's concern with the past, present and future. Short-term oriented people pay more attention to the past and the present, whereas long-term

oriented people are more with the future. Short-term orientation emphasizes individualism and believes in equality, whilst long-term orientated people accept unequal social relations and consider that older people and men are more superior to younger people and women. They value working hard and being frugal, and attach importance on education.