**Examining the complexities of Chinese international students' interpersonal communications: A field study of campus services in British Columbia**

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**Abstract:** This research focuses on three BC post-secondary institutions to help Chinese international students overcome barriers to interpersonal communication. Chinese post-secondary students can contribute unique perspectives to Canadian society. However, linguistic and cultural differences pose problems with interpersonal communication in study and beyond. Improved cross-cultural communication on campuses could enhance students’ educational experience and enrich both cultures. This study investigates barriers Chinese students report and whether current services are helping them effectively. Using a qualitative methodology, this research assesses students’ motivation to interact with strangers on campus, describes obstacles to improved communication, and offers suggestions for improving services for international students.

**Introduction**

A person’s interpersonal life is dependent on his or her ability to communicate effectively his/her thoughts, feelings and needs to the others (Pfeiffer, 1973). For Chinese international students, the cross cultural experiences play an important role in their intercultural study since it indicates the competency of achieving their education goals. As a growing number of Chinese international students coming to Canada, British Columbia is the most popular province for those international students to enrich their intercultural educational experiences. More importantly, the rise of international students develops campus communities and explores the capacity of understanding university intercultural and ethnical experiences (Ellis-bosold, 2013). As Chinese international students has been identified as the largest group of international students on campus in British Columbia (Ministry of Advanced Education BC), understanding this group of international students enhances the quality of campus services and elevates the experiences of students’ intercultural experiences.

When encounter with cross cultural experiences, intercultural communication is essential to analyze the degrees of Chinse international students’ campus lives. On this basis, I define interpersonal communication as a dialogical interaction (verbal or symbolic), that links human to human through a process of deliberate or accidental transfer of meaning. It therefore takes more than one person to engage in interpersonal communication. While effective interpersonal communication enhances relationships and provides clarity and direction (Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, 2007), non-effective interpersonal communication leads to confusion, fear and embarrassment. Moreover, interpersonal communication can be compounded by various sociocultural factors that include, but are not limited to culture, power differences, technology, and environment (Adler, et al., 2007). This research is concerned about Chinese international students’ interpersonal communication competency in Canadian universities context. This research aims to help three educational institutions improve services in terms of supporting international students’ cross-cultural adaptation process. For this purpose, I examined the approaches that the institutions used to assist their overseas students to facilitate the transition process from the original culture to a new one. Through this study, recommendations are provided to the institutions on facilitating the process of the overseas students’ cultural transition based on our investigation of three institutions that have considerable number of students from other cultural background. With the suggestions, the universities would find them to be of use and reflect on their interaction with overseas students and thereby enhance the approaches of managing the anticipated challenges collaboratively with international students.

**Literature review**

Previous studies have been focused on different perspectives on campus service for Chinese international students in the context of North America and the expectations of international students while they are studying abroad is the major reason that challenge the design of campus services (Kuh, 2009). The differences on cultural beliefs and values which are embedded in language limitations and cultural differentiations challenge campus service for international students (Ellis-bosold, 2013). Di Maria (2012) illustrates psychological intensity of intercultural interactions is one of the factors that cause the difficulties for international students’ campus service. Besides, several studies have been carried out about international students’ cultural adaptation and adjustment to universities are the important factors for carrying on campus service in Canada (Leary, 2011). In the United States, researches have been focused on international students’ difficulties around language barrier and academic adjustments in American universities (Zhang, Zhou, 2010; Liu, Sun & Wang, 2010). Pfeiffer (1973) observes that interpersonal communication is well known for its challenging process especially when it results in misunderstandings and a failure to achieve a common understanding through use of a foreign language and a lack of self-articulation. It is however questionable to what extent different researchers may have considered the case of Chinese international students’ interpersonal communication in North America. Therefore, as interpersonal communication has been shown as one of the most important factors for international students’ campus service (Leary, 2011; Di Maria, 2012; Ellis-bosold, 2013), it is vital to understand the elements of causing this difficulties for those international students. More importantly, campus service should take interpersonal communication from the Chinese international students into consideration and focus on how to enhance their interpersonal communication competencies by providing related campus supports.

**Language limitations**

Most research papers concluded that language is the crucial barrier and concern of the international students studying in North American universities who use English as a second language (Huang, 1997; Qian, 2002; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004). Communication problems often result in anxiety and depression for international students (Young, 1992). Moreover, when studying in new country, international students are compelled to deal simultaneously with coping with the new environment as well as the new situations, people, beliefs, and above all, language, which are unfamiliar and totally different from those in their own countries (Herlevi, 2000). Research reveals that it is not easy for Chinese international students to adapt to new situations in a new country where communication in a second language with local students is not easy given the assorted cultural differences that poses a real challenge (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). Certainly, this causes difficulties in expectations and approaches to learn from local students (Grey, 2002). Thus, lack of language skill impacts Chinese international students’ interpersonal communication competency from a mental perspective as they struggle to study overseas.

**Difference in Academic Adjustment of International Students**

Academic adjustment of international students has a close connection with their English language skills and it is the paramount concern for them (Liu, Sun & Wang, 2010). Academic adjustment is related to the international students’ cultural backgrounds, which is the reason they perceive their learning environment differently (Lambert, 1973). It is generally understood that different ways of knowing contextualize learning to our different cultural backgrounds. Edwards and Tonkin (1990) observes that in comparison, local and Chinese students differ in their approach to education or learning. The education system in China is more of teacher-centered while that in North America is more student-centered (Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Students in China gain knowledge in class by listening and taking notes rather than interacting with teachers and fellow students (Gu, 2006). Within the Chinese context, educational emphasis is more on examination scores than on the procedure of acquiring knowledge (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2009). Thus, a culture-related behaviour such as lack of motivation to engage in class discussion with teachers and local students becomes more of a barrier to Chinese international students to interpersonal communication competency rather than an enhance of their ability to communicate in English language with the people they meet in a new environment (Liu, Sun & Wang, 2010).

**Synthesis**

Literature germane to this study reveals that most researchers have targeted Chinese international students studying in American universities rather than Canadian universities (Cheng & Leong, 1993; Edwards & Honkin, 1990; Huang, 1997; Liu, Sun & Wang, 2010; Di Maria, 2012). Regarding studies about international students studying abroad in North American universities, there is limited research on how campus service can support Chinese international students in Canadian universities. Although literature reviewed indicates Chinese international students’ challenges of English as a second language, the relationship of Chinese international students’ barriers in interpersonal communication competency and campus service is still under researched.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research is framed in the anxiety/uncertainty management [AUM] theoretical framework, which posits that high levels of uncertainty and anxiety characterized intercultural encounters especially when cultural variability is high (Griffin, 2003; Gudykunst, 2005). According to Gudykunst (2005), effective communication is made possible by one’s ability to manage anxiety and reduce uncertainty about oneself and the people with whom he/she is communicating. While moving out of one’s country comes with its own communication challenges, there is also the intrinsic difficulty of getting oneself hard and understood by those you encounter in a new country. However, components of AUM theory that include self-concept, motivation to interact with strangers, and reaction to strangers can fully enhance effectiveness and competency in interpersonal communication (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010).

In addition, AUM theory explains the international students' culture shock and better understand their predicament, it defines how individuals’ effective communication based on anxiety and uncertainty in social situations (Stephan, Stephan & Gudykunst, 1999). As I discussed in the previous section, interpersonal communication has been the major challenge for Chinese international students when pursuing higher education. The deconstruction of anxiety and uncertainty in AUM theory provides me the lens of understanding the degrees of the difficulties of interpersonal communication in Chinese international students as well as forming my research interview questions. Moreover, AUM theory imposes the phenomenon of cross-cultural adaptation for those Chinese international students and offer me capacity of exploring the factors on what services universities have already provided for international students for supporting them to adapt to local culture and what challenges and difficulties universities are encounter with when operating those services.

**Research Design and Data Collection**

The qualitative research methodology was used to conduct our field study because this method of data collection enables us to obtain rich data for in-depth information (Merriam, 1998). The research employed close-ended questionnaires to supplement information obtained through interview conversations. According to Stake (1995), such a questionnaire is liable to yield high quality usable data, achieve good response rates and provide anonymity for the participants. Besides, it also encouraged more honest and frank answers from the participants. Therefore, as I considered it is applicable to some degree in the investigation of international students’ intercultural adaptation perceptions, close-ended questionnaires provided us with a fuller picture and a better understanding of the phenomenon under study. Besides, the open-ended guiding interview questions supported me to understand the different perspectives of the participants’ experiences since all participants describe their experiences differently (Kvale, 1996). The geographical location of this research was in British Columbia. There were three institutions located in region participated in my research. A total of three staff members from international office were selected to do individual staff interview and 18 of international students from those three institutions were selected to be focus group interviewees. In the six individual interviews after focus group and each interview data was collected by two student in each focus group.

Content analysis was used as data analysis method because it moves from the specific to the general, so that particular instances are observed and then combined into a larger whole or general statement (Chinn & Kramer, 1999). The “Cut-up Put-in-Folders” approach, which is one of content analysis methods, was used to deal with the obtained data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The key words and meanings from transcripts of each interview was cut and put into their appropriate category folder. It was a re-order action to classify the content after the interviews had been done, and put them into new category folder. Followed by AUM theory, I classified three categories that are services, challenges and difficulties from the staff member’s responses because their goal is to reduce the anxiety and uncertainty of international students in their institutions and helped them to adapt to Canadian culture. The difficulties and challenges of their goal were the aspects we emphasised to solve their problems. Three categories, study, life and mind were classified from international students’ data.

**Research Findings**

In this section of the report, analysis and findings of nine interviews were synthesized and presented, incorporating with the theory in point--Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM)—as well as some key concepts of language and verbal communication. With an attempt to present the findings in a crystal clear way, the results were categorized into administrators and students, each of which was followed by subgroups of classification.

**Campus services and supports**

In general, services and supports provided by the three tertiary institutions shared many similarities. All three schools had a clear division of the pre-departure and on-campus services. To elaborate, before the overseas students’ departure, the international student coordinators reached the students mainly by emails, informing them some detailed information such as the process of course registration, lists of textbooks, websites of accommodation rentals and medical insurance plans. Schools equipped with exchange programs such as A and B would take care of logistic matters (e.g. air tickets, airport pick-up service, etc.). At the orientation week, overseas students would have a separate gathering welcomed by the main faculty staff and professors. From the first semester to graduation, international students could expect supporting services varying from peer mentoring programs, academic writing support, a myriad of social events (i.e. international education week, global community) to counseling service. In essence, all the institutions were making their every effort to assist overseas students to lessen their anxieties and pressures caused by culture shock and thus they can maximize their academic performance.

**Challenges and difficulties**

All three institutions attributed the primary challenge at hand to cultural diversity of international students. The administrators admitted that cultural diversity served as a ‘two-sided sword’ in a way that it did enrich ethics presence on campus and hence brings more opinions and ideas on both academic learning and campus activities. However, cultural diversity turned out to be a dilemma when it came to improving student services after collecting opinions from campus surveys. One elaboration could be the target language to be translated in campus-based social media (e.g. websites, flyers, posters) to promote activities and services. In this case, attaching translation on the public materials could be a thoughtful act that approached to the corresponding group of students; whereas if the selection of language was mishandled, it might give rise to racial and discrimination issues.

**Future enhancement of services**

Echoing cultural diversity as the major challenge for the time being, the three institutions all expressed their intentions on striving for enhancing diversity of their staff members in order to cater for needs of overseas students. Instead of giving specific measures of improvement, the administrators gave a general view of future employment of staff in international student office, address their multilingual capabilities and culture mindset. More detailed recommendations were given in the ‘Recommendations’ section.

**Application of AUM theory**

The AUM theory fits the purpose of the study because it incorporates both cognitive (uncertainty reduction) and affective (anxiety reduction) dimensions. It also suggests that the twin processes of uncertainty and anxiety reduction are key mediating variables for intercultural adaptation (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen & Bruschke, 1998). Gudykunst (2005) contends that when our needs are met, we are motivated to interact with the host nationals. In this regard, AUM theory posits three needs: 1) our need for a sense of predictability; 2) our need for sense of group inclusion; 3) our need for diffuse anxiety (Gudykunst, 2005). Back to the campus services, according to the administrators from three institutions, the primary supporting services beyond academic learning are peer mentoring programs and cultural activities. The mentoring programs, in which senior local or overseas students are expected to have regular conversations with new students, aim to facilitate intercultural adjustment by sharing firsthand experience of local cultural and surroundings. Gaining information on unfamiliar environment through two-way communication instead of simply by media, newcomers will find the environment more predictable and thus become less anxious. Besides of alleviating the sense of unpredictability, a range of cultural activities aims to motivate overseas students to participate in the campus community and hence enhance their sense of group inclusion. These two primary services together are expected to diffuse newcomers’ anxiety due to being alienated to the new surroundings. When these needs proposed by the AUM theory are met, overseas students are motivated to communicate with the host nationals, which enables them to effectively transit through intercultural adjustment.

**Findings from Chinese internationals students focus groups**

Language proficiency poses an enormous threat to overseas students from non-English speaking countries in their study and beyond. To put it specifically, the difficulties include being unable to understand humor and slangs used by instructors, reluctance to engage in discussion, feeling frustrated to grades due to deviance of thinking and writing. These situations raised the anxiety and uncertainty in the new English-learning environment, which further holds them back from participating in class contribution. I believe the root cause of this malicious cycle can be attributed to the learning environment where we grew up. It is different from the one of our host nationals. Gudykunst and Mody (2002) argues that Asian culture, though it values knowledge, discourages verbalizing knowledge. Hence, the rhetorical tradition has been profound in Western education paradigm, while Asian cultures values silence in many settings, in particular with the presence of authority. This non-argumentation learning environment results in obedient and linear way of thinking that hampers Chinese students’ class performance in Western academic setting.

There were two exceptions of responses I received from two Chinese student, claiming that they hardly had problems in language proficiency. Rather, the Chinese student admitted he was concerned with his self-discipline if given too much autonomous time. All my participants said they would consult the writing center if needs arose, even though he did not experience major writing problems.

**Out-of-class Living**

As mentioned above, language as the major challenge to overseas students also resonates in their extracurricular lives. My participants admitted that they could hardly find activities to engage in and thus felt bored and had sense of isolation. Occasionally, they would take part in activities organized by Chinese communities, but still felt reluctant to join local communities. Similar to academic engagement, owing to disadvantageous language ability, students were likely to mingle with peers who had similar background after classes, which was beyond control of schools. Apart from language differences across cultures, the family types that Chinese students were brought up can also crystallize low participation of local activities. Bernstein (1971) articulated that in a positional family, parents use imperative modes of control that do not make use of any appeals but simply give orders, which based on stereotypical social norms, ask children to purse the obligation that the occupant of that position must fulfill. In contrast, parents in a person-oriented family use rational and personalized appeals and require sophisticated skills of persuasion. To my knowledge, the East is more positional and the West is more person oriented. According to Bernstein’s proposition and my knowledge, Chinese students who have been accustomed to be given orders tend to lose the motivation to engage in activities that are on a to-do list. Together with the language barrier, it can be seen that the students have little motivation to become involved in the host culture.

**Findings from individual interviews with students**

For the purpose of gaining a better understanding of intercultural adaptation among overseas student, I shifted the questions focus of individual interviews, allowing us to delve into more depth. In this regard, the emphasis of our questions was put to ‘transformation of mindset’. For most of the participants, it is their first time to live without high supervision for a long period. That is to say, they must be independent to plan the time after classes. In general, participants maintain that they become more autonomous and self-disciplined in terms of both academic learning and financial matters, comparing to they were in China. In addition, an open mindset and the ability of embracing differences are the most noticeable transformations after living in BC for several years, according to some senior overseas students. These transformations demonstrate the learning and growth-facilitating nature of adaptation process (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). Adler (1975) explained that the culture shock experience should be viewed in a broader context of transition shock, a phenomenon that leads to profound learning, growth and self-awareness. From this sense, the responses from participants echo Adler’s argument, illustrated that intercultural adaptation can be transformative learning process.

**Conclusion and Implications for Canadian Universities**

**Provide diversity training at workplace**

Considering the interdependent relationship between the educational institutions and enrolled international students, I suggest that institutions use diversity training to educate employees to cope with cultural diversity issues among international students.

Diversity training is an ongoing process to educate employees on the proper way to treat people of different backgrounds (Madera, & Neal, 2011). The purpose of diversity training is to increase participant’s cultural awareness, knowledge, and communication. Diversity training can benefit an organization by preventing civil rights violations, increasing relationships among different identity groups, and promoting better teamwork (Madera, & Neal, 2011).

For diversity training to be effective, an organization should ensure that their training program is an ongoing effort supported by top management (Madera, & Neal, 2011).

**Hire more multilingual employees in student’s services**

Based on my data collection, institutions hire workers who master more than one language as they grapple with the challenges of dealing with international students from widely different cultures would be helpful for enhancing the anxiety and uncertainty emotion from Chinese international students’ interpersonal communication.

Although English has become the institution’s official language used in both teaching and communication, having employees who speak other languages is beneficial. A large proportion of my participants indicated that it brought great convenience in communication when they spoke their first language to campus staff members. Some of them felt more confident and comfortable when they met staff members from the same culture. With multilingual communication playing such a key role in the international workplace, it has never been more important to ensure that institutions have the employees with right language skills within their communities.

When considering a new hire with multilingual skills, or when harnessing the skills of existing multilingual employees, arranging them to take a language proficiency test is a relatively inexpensive and time-efficient way to obtain peace of mind (Tange, & Lauring, 2009).

**Get international students involved in campus activity designing and promotion**

Seeing the diversity in international student’s needs and interests, I suggest that the institutions improve their campus activity designing and promotion with the participation of international students.

Regarding recommendations on cultural activities programming, it is rational for campus administrators to put themselves into students’ shoes by gaining a better knowledge of their cultural background and personal interests before organizing major functions/activities. One possible method will be conducting surveys on students’ ideas of their preferred type of activities. Questionnaires are expected to be as specific and cultural inclusively as possible, addressing the issue of sense of isolation mentioned in our findings. After collecting the data, campus staff may reach international students advisors to seek for professional advices in terms of objectives of intended activities. The institutions may even consider building an activity designer team with representatives from international students, which can help the institutions work out a plan that achieves various expectations. In so doing, an incorporation of students’ input and professional suggestions is more likely to cater for the needs of wider groups of overseas students.

Furthermore, with an attempt to raise awareness of students about upcoming events, international student offices are supposed to set up a communication focal point, assigning some campus volunteers to promote the activities around campus. It may minimize the shortcoming of newsletters that students tend not to pay much attention to due to the length.

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