

Transition of Chinese Students to Australian Universities

Strategies to Support Their Academic Learning

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the high quality of life and study environment in Australia has attracted an increasing number of Chinese students to apply to Australian universities. However, the major differences between eastern and western societies bring some difficulties for Chinese students studying in Australia, such as social and cultural challenges, learning styles and language barriers. To tackle these issues, this study will investigate multiple strategies utilized by these students to support their academic learning. Two graduated Chinese students from one Australian university are invited as participants to conduct a semi-structured interview. This study aims to help Chinese students to adapt to multilingual settings as well as provide suggestions to the curriculum design of Australian university lecturers and tutors.

Keywords: Chinese students, social and cultural issues, learning styles, language barriers, Australian university, strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the number of Asian students studying abroad at a university level has increased dramatically, accounting for 56% of the world's international students [1]. In 2020, Australia becomes the leading country for international students to study, attracting 31.3% international students worldwide [2]. China (29%), India (18%), Nepal (8%), Vietnam (4%) and Malaysia (3%) are the top five countries sending students to Australia [3]. According to a report from Australian Government, the comprehensive educational system, high ranking universities and high satisfaction of living in such a diverse community become three primary reasons that make Australian universities so attractive [4].

However, as English as an additional language (EAL) speakers with an eastern learning and living background, Chinese international students still confront considerable hurdles. As a result, it's critical to consider some instructional approaches that can help them overcome their challenges. Although previous study offered some basic recommendations for all international students studying abroad, few studies focused on key challenges faced by Asian international

students. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to fill the gap by proposing strategies that can support Chinese international students to tackle the following challenges: language barriers, social and cultural difficulties and learning styles.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do Chinese student tackle challenges to ensure their academic performance in Australian universities?

To narrow the research scope, this study only focuses on the three challenges mentioned above. The following section will provide a detailed explanation of these three difficulties faced by them in Australian universities.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Language Barriers

As Ping and Cross point out, language issue is the major obstacle of Asian international students' academic achievement as well as social engagement [5]. Due to their non-English background (NESB) and distinct EAL learning experience in home countries, it takes them

longer to develop English skills in Australia. For example, Asian countries use a teacher-centred learning style that focuses solely on grammar and vocabulary in the classroom [6][7]. With exam-oriented pressure on reading and writing skills, students play the role of passive [6]. Besides, society does not provide opportunities for EAL students to practice English outside the classroom [6]. As a result, when these NESB students start to study in Australia universities, their low English skills limit them to grasp lectures and participate in group discussions.

In the long run, however, living in Australia can improve Asian international students' listening and speaking skills. Zhang and Mi conduct a two-year study of Chinese students' English challenges at an Australian university [7]. The result shows that these students' speaking and listening abilities have improved significantly, whereas writing remains a big barrier with no temporal effects. This is especially true in academic writing, where the strong demand for academic English in universities makes it difficult for non-native English speakers to satisfy [8].

3.2. Social And Cultural Issues

According to the social and cultural obstacles faced by Asian international students, a majority of literature identify loneliness and social difficulties as the two key intertwined issues. One of the main difficulty faced by Asian international students is the sensation of isolation [9]. They often experience a high degree of stress due to homesickness and avoid associating with people they are unfamiliar with [10]. In other words, before they can reconstruct their social lives, these students must change themselves to better embrace western society.

Even if Asian international students are able to join social groups, linguistic and cultural limitations become the primary impediment to make Australian friends [11]. Because of the typical 'Australian culture and language' in Australian jokes, Asian students find it difficult to participate [5]. Such a "cultural shock" may result in misunderstandings and distance, making it difficult for these people from different cultural backgrounds to form one social group [5].

3.3. Learning Styles

Learning styles is another essential component that has a significant impact on Asian international students, even though most students identify high levels of satisfaction with Australian education [12]. As Wong points out, Asian learning styles promote a teacher-centered learning model in which teachers have absolute power [12]. For instance, most Asian schools use two basic concepts: rote learning and exam-oriented learning [12]. In contrast, Australian education emphasizes student-centered instruction and encourages

students to develop critical thinking [12]. As a result, Australian universities require Asian students to transfer from passive to active learners.

Furthermore, Asian students struggle with note-taking and understanding lecturers during a one-hour lecture due to language barriers and self-learning principles [12]. This is in contrast to the 'spoon-feeding' method used in Asian classrooms, which relies on teachers to explain all knowledge in details and leave time for student to acquire. Accordingly, in Australian universities, professors' guidance and passion are critical to facilitate Asian students to participate actively in class and overcome cultural and language hurdles [13].

4. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the learning strategies that Chinese international students use to improve their academic performance in a multicultural learning environment (Australia). Since its nature is to investigate human behaviors in specific situations, qualitative research methods are used to collect data [14]. It draws on the case study of two Chinese students.

4.1. Method

The two participants were conducted a 75-minute semi-structured interview in a focus group via Zoom. They discussed prepared questions about implementing a variety of strategies to support their learning.

4.2. Participants

Participants include two Chinese international students from an Australian university who have finished a Master of teaching degree at the faculty of Education. They use their own learning experiences (attending seminars and some lectures) to discuss strategies they implement for different challenges.

5. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of these two participants, they will be named as 'B' and 'S' in the following discussion.

5.1. Language Barriers

The primary challenge mentioned by these two EAL learners is the limited knowledge of vocabulary, especially for terminologies and slang. One of the most common methods they use is to check the meaning of unknown words in the dictionary. Meanwhile, they believe that visual learning materials, such as PowerPoint slides and lectures/seminars recordings, can improve their understandings of learning contents. S

also prefers teachers to explain key terms through multiple modes to deepen her comprehension.

In terms of micro skills, speaking and writing become the two significant issues that hinder their academic performance in and out of class. They name group discussion as 'embarrassed talk,' since the common way for them to participate is expressing their contributions. B suggests writing a draft and rehearsing ahead of a formal presentation. This kind of preparation can help B to build up confidence and relax. Speaking of academic writing, both participants acknowledge the importance of learning from academic papers. This includes the genre, academic vocabulary and specific sentence structures of these articles. Imitation plays the key role to support their academic writing skills in the short term. For long run, B believes that EAL learners can send their drafts to teachers for feedback progressively.

5.2.Social And Cultural Issues

Language barriers and social and cultural issues are intertwined. EAL learners feel disengaged in class when they cannot understand the topics discussed by Australian background students. Both participants agree that the language use is closely related to the cultural events mentioned by Australian students. Therefore, teachers and peers need to create a supportive learning environment for Chinese students to participate. As a representative of shy learners, S emphasizes the importance of peer support to guide her to engage in classroom learning. These peers need to be familiar with Chinese cultures. S also values the trust relationship between teachers and students. Teachers, as the class controller, can provide her with sense of belongings when she interacts with teachers.

In contrast, B prefers self-learning. She finds that reflective learning becomes the more efficient approach to help her tackle social and cultural issues. This means that teachers need to regularly discuss progress with students to ensure they can achieve their Zone of proximal development (ZPD) under such a multicultural learning environment. Even if her personal interest does not match the mainstream classes, she can still engage in learning at the correct direction without interference of cultural and social differences.

5.3.Learning Styles

The main concern of B and S is the tension between teacher-centred learning and student-centred learning. As Chinese students studying abroad, they need to take time to adapt to "unsupervised" learning and form autonomous learning. For instance, S regards teacher-centred teaching is inefficient and suggests that teachers should give students more time to prepare and then share ideas in front of the whole class. B provides

similar opinions by affirming the benefits of structured teaching system instead of guided teaching. In addition, they believe that online learning becomes a complimentary learning tool to consolidate knowledge, such as watching topic-related videos and searching relevant research papers.

Because both participants transfer from exam-oriented learning to assignment-oriented learning, they apply different strategies that can scaffold them achieve satisfied academic scores. When exams become the main method to assess students' academic performance, S addresses the importance of peer learning. This is due to the limited consultation time provided by lecturers during the semester. Students are less likely to ask questions and gain feedback for the uncertain contents. As a result, the interaction among peers become an alternative approach to keep progress of personal learning. In contrast, B is inclined to self-learning. Surrounded by various learning resources, she contends that which allows individuals adjust learning time and contents.

Moreover, rubrics and samples present two crucial elements that can guide students to create assignment format, understand relevant research, learn English academic writing to enrich writing practice.. S highlights the importance of providing multiple samples to cater for various learning needs of students. With the clear guidance and templates, Chinese students can better accomplish their assignments,

6.CONCLUSION

This paper explores the strategies that Chinese students use to support their learning and tackle difficulties when they transit to Australian universities. From the discussion above, peer-learning, scaffolding from teachers, self-learning all ensure the success of academic performance of these EAL learners. Although language problems and different cultural backgrounds hinder their learning in some aspects, they can create appropriate learning strategies to satisfy individual learning needs with the foundation of prior learning experiences and knowledge. Considering this small scale study with only two participants being interviewed, which cannot represent whole Chinese students in Australian universities. Therefore, future study can focus on a larger group of Chinese students majoring in different courses from multiple Australian universities to make a comparison among them and get an insight into the efficiency of various learning strategies.

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