

The Issues of Sociocultural Adaptation of Chinese Students in FESTU Academic Mobility Programs

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Abstract— In the world globalization era, different opportunities for cross-cultural interactions among institutions of higher learning are expanding that enable them to provide a great variety of Academic Mobility Programs for the international students. This article deals with the issues of sociocultural adaptation of the Chinese students who have chosen Far Eastern State Transportation University for their majoring in different areas of sciences. The University has a rich and good experience in applying the Academic Mobility Programs to the foreign students from the countries of the Asia-Pacific Region and others that help them learn, perceive, understand, and adapt to foreign culture.

Keywords— *Interaction, Mobility, Adaptation, Communication, Difference, Environment, Culture.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, studying the issues of sociocultural adaptation of international students in a foreign environment has been of great importance because of the growing number of universities involved in the process of cross-cultural interactions that allow the students to make their own choice of the international universities for pursuing new and omnifarious knowledge of different fields of sciences and learning to acquire their skills in a different academic setting and developing their social adaptation abilities.

1.1 SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Sociocultural adaptation is understood as a process and result of active adjustment of ethnic groups and individuals to the conditions of the new ethnocultural environment. Such a notion as "enculturation" which means the process of integration of an individual or a social group into other culture through internalization of its symbolic system is also used in the scientific community. The concepts „social“ and „culture“ are closely interconnected. Social adaptation is a process of an individual's active adaptation to the conditions of the social environment through learning the conceptions of the values and norms of the certain community. According to the psychologists, a person's ability to communicate and to conduct vigorous activities is one of the main characteristics of social adaptation. Success of social adaptation depends on many factors, for example: education, communication ability, job, professional qualifications, and creativity. From the view of sociology, there exists the number of conceptual models of

social adaptation. One of them is the standard adaptation - a personality is able to reach integration with a new environment, i.e. he is ready to accept its norms, standards, values, and traditions. The word etymology "adaptation" comes from the Latin word "adaptacio" meaning "adjustment". The initial contents of this concept reflected the process aimed at keeping the organism stability and gave the evidence of the organism adaptation to the conditions of the medium [1]. Over the years, etymologic interpretation of the term "adaptation" has acquired the profound social and cultural meaning, particularly, in the age of the world globalization. Without doubt, the globalization that occurs not only in economies of different countries, but also in the field of university education sets the newer goals for building more effective interactions between groups and individuals in different spheres of life. In addition, it focuses on creating the integrated interdependent world where take place interaction and mutual influence of various communities, nations, cultures, and civilizations. Globalization should help embody the ideas of unity of a human community with maintaining its characteristics [2]. Since the educational system being an integral part of a social medium has undergone considerable changes due to the globalization processes, it requires the new approaches to organizing the teaching and learning activities for the international students, therefore it is necessary for the universities to improve the quality of the educational services in the following spheres: management of education, teaching, learning, research, assessment of the students' knowledge, extra-curriculum activities, and living conditions. The educational services should also include the appropriate learning materials, proper curriculum, and access to any academic information.

1.2 SOCIOCULTURAL CHALLENGES

International students living in another cultural environment and studying in another academic setting are known to face the challenges connected with sociocultural adaptation, i.e. they have to adapt psychologically, morally, and socially to those cultures where they live and study for avoiding possible failure of completing their education overseas. Furthermore, in order to feel self-confident, to raise self-esteem, overcome and cope with such psychological feelings as loneliness, homesickness, disappointment, and

embarrassment, the international students have to try their best to learn the unfamiliar environment and to accept it with all its differences, peculiar features, strangeness, and other rules and manners of behavior. Interpretation of foreign students' sociocultural adaptation deals with the number of specific features, particularly, connected with the problems of cultural dialog. M.M. Bakhtin claims that dialogness is readiness and willingness to communicate with each other „as an equal“ and gift of ready response to standpoint, judgment, and opinions of other people. Interlocutory relationships imply „speaker's recognition“ and „meeting“. This means that interaction of different cultures in a single education setting can be considered as mutual efforts of both sides: it is desirable for the overseas and host sides to actively participate in the dialog: to „question“, „hear out“, „answer“, and „agree“ [3]. Such an approach to communication is very likely to encourage the dialog development between different cultures and to ease understanding and perception of another culture in the process of sociocultural adaptation. Any adaptation to another environment always involves a certain degree of stress. As the international students have to adapt to the foreign academic system that differs considerably from theirs, they are sure to experience stress which they have to cope with; and they should be able to overcome language difficulties. Besides, they have to learn fast to adjust to a different culture and different learning environment if they wish to succeed in studying, communicating, overcoming challenges, avoiding negative emotions, and reducing the psychological barriers. In the process of cross-cultural adaptation, they should accept and observe the unfamiliar norms and behaviors in the foreign community. According to the Hypothesis of A.S. Mak and C. Tran, „international students' self-efficacy is positively correlated to their sociocultural adjustment; the higher self-efficacy (absence of sociocultural difficulties, social confidence, sharing interest, and friendship initiative) that the international students possess, the more successfully they adjust to a different culture. One possible explanation for this is that the international students with a greater expectation of academic achievement, personal growth, and future career tend to have higher self-efficacy. The more they expect to achieve it when studying abroad, the more attention they will pay to adapting to local culture.“ [4].

2. RESEARCH STUDY AND RESULTS

The Institute for International Cooperation at Far Eastern State Transportation University (FESTU) used to have a very good experience in providing such Academic Mobility Programs as the Russian-American and Russian Korean Programs that had been successfully executed. Except for them, the Institute is still offering the Academic Mobility Programs to the international students from China, South Korea, Vietnam, North Korea, Kyrgyzstan, and others. In this article, we focus on the issues of the social adaptability of the Chinese students whose number is the largest at our University. The research study has been conducted among those students who are taking the Bachelor's Program in the field of Logistics and International Management. Our research has been aimed at studying and analyzing the Chinese students' sociocultural adaptation in the new learning environment in view of their behavioral competence, language

ability and communication competence, the cultural distance factor, and academic achievement. We have considered the Chinese students' behavioral competence in the process of social adaptation to the Russian culture from the psychological point of view because psychologists distinguish a person's ability of communication and pursuit of vigorous activities as the main aspects of social adaptation. Social adaptation as a process of a person's adjusting to the conditions of the social environment is accomplished through learning and perceiving the ideas about the norms and values of the social group, family, and the like. In any culture, behavior can be either ethical which is judged as good, right, just, honorable, and praiseworthy or unethical which is judged to be wrong, unjust, dishonorable, or fail to meet an obligation [5]. We have interviewed twenty Chinese students from different groups of the first year selected for the research study as cases; and we have come to the conclusion that fifteen of them are ready to behave absolutely ethically in the non-native environment as if they were in their home community because they are aware of the fact that they have to perceive, to learn another culture, and to respect it if they want to avoid psychological stress of cross-cultural adaptation, to function effectively in the Russian culture, and to be successful in studies and communication with the native speakers. The rest are not sure whether they are able to follow all the rules of behavior in the foreign setting, for instance, they are afraid of failing to meet some obligations related to right behavior among the local students. On the other hand, they are willing to get through some doubts regarding their ability to demonstrate their behavioral competence in the Russian setting and lack of self-confidence in the process of adaptation. In our view, the above mentioned results could be considered as the positive factor because they have appeared to be rather open to another culture. Also, it has been important for us to find out whether the first-year students are able to overcome the language barrier because only some of them can speak Russian fluently and understand it rather well, but the rest experience difficulties in speaking and listening comprehension; as a consequence, they can hardly communicate with the native speakers. According to C. Ward, „language skills are important because they affect the quality and quantity of intercultural interactions“ [6]. This means that the host language ability of the Chinese students can help them much better and faster adjust to the host culture and easier achieve the academic success which is necessary for them in the educative process at the University. The analysis of the above aspect has shown that those Chinese students whose language skills are good or very good are able to easily and much better adapt to another culture and to communicate effectively with the host people in various social environments and academic setting as well. To achieve that goal, the University teachers working with the Chinese students, particularly, in the first year, should focus on developing their host language abilities and communication competence based on the learning programs specifically elaborated for the international students. It should be emphasized that the Chinese students whose Russian is fluent naturally feel rather comfortable in a different sociocultural environment: they are more easily able to adjust to the Russian culture, and they have more opportunities to communicate with the Russian students within the groups in class or outside.

The cultural distance factor means the degree of difference between the host culture and international student's culture. If the gap between the two cultures is big, the international students, as a rule, experience the sociocultural adaptation problems: "the greater degree of cultural distance, the more likely an individual has to experience sociocultural adjustment problems" [7]. Since the Russian and Chinese cultures are quite different from each other which are expressed in values, code of conduct, habits, living style, communication, way of thinking, figurative language, expression of their emotions, and social etiquettes, the Chinese students are supposed to face the difficulties in adjusting to the Russian environment; the Academic Mobility Programs should be targeted at providing them with the appropriate measures and curricular and extra-curricular activities for easing their adaptation to the Russian learning setting at the University as well as their adjustment to the external environment. Sociocultural adaptation of the Chinese students to the new learning setting in the context of gender, age, time in the country is also of great interest for us. The Chinese students (75% male and 25% female) have been involved into the research study. Analyzing the results of the study, we have come to the following conclusion: first, in the term of gender, the male students feel more comfortable and more confident, particularly, in relation to clothing customs, social customs, and behavior compared to the female student. The male students are more willing to fight for sociocultural adaptation therefore they are more successful to reach their goals than the female students. On the contrary, the female students more easily interact with the local people in social situations that allow them to adjust to the host culture faster. Another consideration is connected with age which depends on social clocks leading to cross-cultural differences in the life-changing events, for instance, finishing studies at a university or finding the first job, etc. The social clock phenomenon shows that the older students experience more difficulties in sociocultural adaptation than the younger students since the former have deeply-rooted habits, values, interests, and customs, and it is rather hard for the older students to change the abovementioned aspects because they get used to them. Staying in a different culture and different learning setting, the older students are less likely to avoid the risks that could result in some failure. Those students are not completely ready for the sociocultural adaptation to the Russian environment, but they are willing to avoid uncertainty and overcome the cultural challenges, and perceive the host culture in order to feel comfortable among the host students and to study at the University successfully. Concerning the academic achievement, the majority of the Chinese students interviewed strive for achieving the academic success almost in all the subjects they have chosen for studying at the University. They are greatly interested in improving Russian and getting profound knowledge of different fields of sciences. To be successful in another academic setting, they should try to learn to perceive and respect the culture which is not similar to theirs, to adapt to this culture, and to overcome cultural challenges and shocks. M. Winkelman defines culture shock as a normal part of being in a different cultural environment [8]. It is necessary for the Chinese students to be well aware that they are in a state of culture shock before the situation can be resolved. Culture shock, which is defined as stress and

conflict, occurs particularly in the case when the international students are entirely involved into the new culture which might make a strong psychological effect on them, and it often leads to feelings of confusion and anxiety connected with cultural and social rule changes. Most of the Chinese students are able to easily and successfully adapt to the Russian learning environment, but it is harder for them to overcome the language barriers to communicate with the native speakers. They are also ready to overcome culture distance, different cultural challenges, and culture shock because their goal is not only to demonstrate their aspiration for the good or best academic achievement, personal growth, and future career promotion, but also to show their high self-efficacy, i.e. absence of socio-difficulties, social confidence, and sharing interest in the different academic setting; hence, their high sociocultural adaptation to the host culture helps them feel comfortable among the Russian students, build relationships and communicate in the groups they study in.

3. CONCLUSION

Thus, though the analysis of the obtained data has shown that there still remain the problems of adapting to the host learning process accompanied by stress and some negative feelings related to absence of adequate communication in Russian within the group, difficulties in understanding the cultural peculiarities of the host environment (different traditions, behavioral norm, etc.), the awareness and perception of another culture help the Chinese students predict the possibilities and opportunities for what to expect when interacting outside their native environment thereby promoting their understanding of diversity of cultures and their ability to accept it. The decisive factor in successful sociocultural adaptation is the willingness and readiness of international and host students to maintain the cultural dialog with one another. As for the Academic Mobility Programs, they should create such conditions and surroundings that help the Chinese students cope with the psychological problems and teach them how to establish and interpret intentions in the Russian culture environment and how to behave in the ways that are acceptable in diverse situations of their daily life there.

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