

The Impact of Taiwanese Faculty Perception on Western Students' Adaption: Challenges and Benefits

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand the impact of Taiwanese faculty's view on western international students' adaption via conducting 62 in-depth interview sat a university of Taiwan. The results show that the theories of cross cultural management and adaptation explain how and why Taiwanese faculty perceptions affect western students' adaptation and academic performance. Taiwanese Faculty mentioned major benefits that international students brought to the class, including cultural exchange, global knowledge sharing and English improvement. Yet, some challenges that faculty faced: personality issue, communication deficiency, language difficulties, cultural difference sand insufficient knowledge of Taiwan education can be addressed by providing additional educational opportunities for international students and training for faculty.

Keywords: faculty perception, adaption, benefits, challenges, cross-cultural management

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Taiwan ministry of education (MOE) has promoted international cultural and educational exchange cooperation. In order to increase Taiwan national competitiveness, in August 2003, executive Yuan ordered that the task of attracting more foreign students to study in Taiwan to be included in the National Development Plan. The method of target management, pursue to increase the amount of foreign students studying in Taiwan "ten times in ten years" (Chang, 2005).

Due to this policy, more international students are coming to Taiwan to pursue a university degree. Students choose to study in Taiwan for various reasons, including limited access to higher education in their home country, the prestige of earning a degree in a developed country and the possibility of scholarships or other financial assistance. According to Roberts; Chou & Ching (2009), the main reason that international students choose to come to Taiwan to study is because of the scholarships that are offered. Therefore Taiwanese universities are committed to promote internationalization (Chang, 2005). To be effective, both groups, faculty members and international students have to learn and cooperate mutually.

Adaptation Issues

International students face adaptation issues, such as leaving home, being on their own and adjusting to a new environment. They need to get used to live in a new culture, being stereotyped as a foreigner, and possibly dealing with a language that they are unfamiliar with. In addition, food, climate, class structure and teaching methods can be different. These students have little time to adapt to these differences before being expecting to perform academically (Spiering, 2008).

Adaptation can be difficult when international students come from cultures that are not similar to the host country. Culture is much more than simply different languages, food or the clothes people wear (Spiering, 2008). According to Harris and Moran (1991), culture can be categorized as sense of self and space, communication and language, dress and appearance, food and feeling habits, time and time consciousness, relationships, values and norms, beliefs and attitudes, mental process and learning, and work habits and practice. Adaptation for international students in Taiwan is much more than learning the language or adjusting to the food. This adaptation process can create communication problems resulting in anxiety and stress. If international students are unable to adapt, these factors can lead to depression or students returning home early before finishing their studies (Spiering, 2008).

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Besides dealing with the social adjustment of living in Taiwan, international students have to manage the academic adjustment of being a student in Taiwan. They need to get used to different teaching styles, different personal behaviors of the professors and to the Taiwanese education system.

Research Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how faculty perceives international students and their adaptation process to university life in Taiwan. Therefore the objectives of this study are:

- Explore how faculty perceives international students.
- Explore how these perceptions can influence international students’ lives and academic performance.
- Explore how international students perceive faculty.

Research Questions

- How does faculty perceive international students in general?
- In what ways do faculty perceptions affect international students?
- How do international students perceive faculty?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Faculty members are influential in international student lives. They have been shown to play a major role in students’ performance and adaptation (Adrian-Taylor; Noels; Tischler, 2007). Since international students come from several countries different from Taiwan, they need to adapt to the new living environment and academic differences. As this study is interested in how faculty view international students and how this in turn affects students’ adaptation process, theories related to adaptation are going to be reviewed.

Adaptation Theory

Cross cultural adaptation theory views the process of adaptation that people experience when entering a new cultural environment (Kim, 2005). Kim (2005) defines cross-cultural adaptation as, “*the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar socio cultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment*”.

Kim (1991; 1995; 2001; 2005) utilizes a system approach with an emphasis on the open systems perspective to examine what happens to people when they enter a new culture. This approach allows for a broader picture of cross cultural adaptation and expands beyond the unidirectional “*cause and effect*” concepts sometimes used to examine cross cultural adaptation. According to Kim (2005), refugees, diplomats, military personnel, missionaries, and students regardless of length of time all go through the cross cultural adaptation process when they move to a new culture and must adapt to the host environment:

As they confront their predicaments as strangers and engage in new learning for an improved “goodness of fit”, they begin to undergo a gradual process of personal transformation beyond their original cultural perimeters and toward a more inclusive and less categorical self conception and self other orientation (Kim, 2005).

The cross cultural adaptation process can be affected by people’s ethnic proximity to the host culture. Studies have reported that domestic students interact more with international students that are more ethnically similar to them than they do with the ones that are more ethnically different from themselves (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). People from cultures that are far different from the host culture also have been shown to have a harder time with adaptation (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990).

Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede, conducted a comprehensive study in order to prepare a framework for assessing cultural differences. The aim of his study was to give profound insight into other cultures in order to

achieve more effective interaction between people from different cultures (Hofstede, 1980; 2001). His research identifies four cultural dimensions: Individualism/Collectivism, Power distance, Masculinity/Femininity and Uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede’s (1980; 2001).

Individualism/Collectivism

This dimension focuses on the perceptions of the self and on the issue of whether a sense of independence or interdependence is fostered by one’s own or by a host society (Gudykunst, 1983; 1998; 2003; Gudykunst and Kim, 1997). Collectivistic cultures emphasize in close relationships and interconnectedness as well as value in interpersonal relationships (Spiering, 2008). On the other hand, an individualistic culture values independence, self-reliance and assertiveness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These cross cultural differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures can prevent international students from making a close relationship with the opposite group (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). This difficulty to form friendships because of cultural differences can cause psychological or social distress in the international student (Constantine, M.G., Okazaki, S., & Utsey, S.O, 2004).

Power Distance

Individuals from high power distance cultures accept power distributions in their societies and consider superiors differently from subordinates. In these societies, equality and opportunity for everyone is stressed (Banki, 2009). According to Ojano Sheehan & Pearson, 1995; Spiering, 2008; and Wehrly, 1988, students from Asian countries, are expected to listen to their professors, not speak and memorize what they are taught. However classroom styles and relationships with professors can be different for students coming from the United States or other countries with similar teaching styles. U.S professors tend to require participation from students and expect students to ask questions (Spiering, 2008), while Asian professors expect their students to listen to their teaching and not to ask questions. Having students that are used to class discussions can affect their teaching styles and the power distance between them and their students.

Masculinity/Femininity

This dimension focuses on gender roles in a culture. The term gender is used to distinguish the male and female members of a society with a special emphasis on social factors (Berry, 1997; Banki, 2009). According to traditional sex ideology, men are superior to women and should control and dominate them. Men are supposed to be assertive, tough, engaged with material success, while the feminine roles are restricted to caring and nurturing behaviors, where women are supposed to be more modest and tender (Hofstede, 2001). This gender inequality can directly affect the adaptation and academic performance of female students living in a foreign country. This can bring conflicts between professors and classmates during group projects or discussions that involve both genders.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The last dimension deals with a society’s tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity (Hofstede, 1997; Gudykunst, 1988; 1993; Gudykunst and Nishida, 1984). People in uncertainty avoidance countries feel uncomfortable in unstructured situations; therefore, they apply strict rules and laws in each sphere of social and cultural life, and plan everything carefully in order to avoid uncertainty. In contrast, people in uncertainty accepting cultures, are more tolerant to diversity; they have as few rules as possible and individuals feel free to make decisions without having to refer to superiors (Banki, 2009). Students that come from countries where the avoidance of the uncertainty is low are used to more flexible teaching methods, different from countries where the avoidance of the uncertainty is high where the teaching methods are rigid.

METHODOLOGY

Method

This study employed qualitative methods to analyze the data. Qualitative studies allow broader questions that can be open ended and flexible (Spiering, 2008). Since this study is not looking for explanations or predictions, the qualitative approach is the most appropriate method because it looks for “*insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing*” (Merriam, 1998). This study used individual interviews with open ended questions to examine the faculty’s perceptions and the international students’ interpretations.

Participants

The data was collected from a private school located in the second major city of the southern part of Taiwan. A total of 62 participants representing 19 countries, including faculty members and international students were interviewed. The majority of the participants of both groups were male.

Procedures

The data was collected using individual interviews and observation methods. In order to maintain participants’ confidentiality, each participant was individually interviewed and assured that the information they shared would only be used for the purposes of this study. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open ended questions to prevent from becoming oral surveys (Chang, 1996). With the participant’s permission, each interview was recorded using a camcorder. The participants that didn’t agree to be recorded were interviewed and the author wrote important information about the conversation. Some participants that were no longer living in Taiwan but were considered key persons for this study were interviewed using electronic methods such as Skype (VOIP) or Messenger. During each interview the author wrote some notes of participants’ behaviors that were helpful for the analysis of the data.

After the individual interviews were completed the video and voice recording sessions were transcribed i to facilitate the analysis of the data. The responses were reviewed inductively to find themes to classify the data. Thematic analysis allows the participants’ own language, practices, and behaviors to come through in the results from which ideas and patterns can be seen (Spiering, 2008; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Faculty responses were analyzed first. The faculty demographic information was reviewed. Then the open ended questions were examined. The first open ended question asked was: “What do you see as benefits of having international students in the classroom?” Responses were reviewed and a list of all the characteristics given was created. Themes were developed from the characteristics list and each characteristic was placed into its corresponding theme. The second question asked to the faculty was about the challenges that faculty faced by having international students in the classroom. Again a list was made of the characteristics described by faculty of their perceptions of challenges. These characteristics were separated into themes. Next faculty members were asked how they would characterize international students. Their comments were examined for common patterns and then assigned to one of the themes. The fourth question was related to how faculty thought international students would characterize them. After the information was reviewed the responses were assigned to the corresponding theme. Then the faculty was asked to describe a positive and negative interaction they had with an international student. Two separate lists were developed for each example related to the type of interaction. Themes were developed from the lists and the interactions were assigned to one of the themes. After providing an example of positive and negative interactions, faculty was asked how they felt the interaction affected the subsequent communication with the student. These responses were examined and collapsed into themes. Finally the faculty commented how they felt the interaction affected the student’s performance. Responses were analyzed and assigned to the correspondent theme.

International students’ responses were analyzed next. Their demographic information was reviewed. Then the open ended questions were examined. The first open ended question asked was: “How would you describe professors generally?” Responses were reviewed and a list of all the descriptions given was created. Themes were created from the descriptors list and each descriptor was placed into its correspondent theme. The next question students were asked was: “How do you think professors would describe you?” Again a list was made of students’ opinions on how faculty would describe them. These descriptors were separated into themes. Next students were asked to give an example of a positive and negative interaction they had with a professor. Two separate lists were developed for each example related to the type of interaction. Themes were developed from the lists and the interactions were assigned to one of the themes. After providing an example of positive and negative interactions, students were asked how they felt the interaction affected the subsequent communication with the professor. These responses were examined and collapsed into themes. Finally the students commented how they felt the interaction affected their academic performance. Responses were analyzed and assigned to the correspondent theme.

RESULTS

Faculty Perception

Faculty viewed having international students as beneficial because they bring different perspectives and cultural diversity to the classroom: *“I think having students coming from many different countries give me the opportunity to understand different kinds of cultures, so it is good to know how people from different countries think about the same topic, so I think it is better to have more international students in the classroom so that the students are not so homogeneous”*. They also mentioned some of the challenges of having international students in the classroom due to language issues, unfamiliarity with the Taiwanese education system and cultural differences: Two of the main challenges of having international students are: *“It is difficult to make them understand the local culture and people’s way of thinking; and it’s not easy to help them overcome the difficulties of academic matters due to some language barriers”*.

Faculty provided examples of positive and negative interactions they had with international students. Positive examples given by the respondents included students performing well and going to the professor for help. On the other hand, negative examples were more related to cultural differences. An example of a positive interaction was: *“Sometimes they come to my office to ask questions and most of my students are diligent and hardworking”*. An example of a negative interaction was: *“I don’t like any student to speak in my class or do something else that is not related to the class and not fully paying attention to what I am teaching, because I am the one paying full attention to my class so I expect that students will have the same response”*.

Respondents also described how they felt these interactions affected how the student responded to them later and their performance in the classroom. In some cases, the interactions had positive results in the students, increasing confidence between student – professor and student participating more in class: *“The class discussions helped to improve the relationship between professor – student. After some discussions the students feel more comfortable to ask questions and provide their own ideas to the class”*. In other cases, the interaction had a negative impact on the student: *“I had a student from Berlize that I am not quite sure what she wanted to learn from me. At the beginning she was very aggressive, but once the student touched the real work, she suddenly disappeared. I was shocked and upset because she didn’t tell me that she didn’t want to work for me anymore; she just went to find other professors and asked them to be her thesis advisor. This is very disrespectful behavior to Taiwanese professors in Taiwan”*. Obviously, respect for teachers is a social norm in Taiwanese society. Conversely, western students tend to be more individualistic behaviors on learning process.

International Student Perception

In general, international students described professors in a positive way using words such as kind and helpful: *“My professors are really kind and always willing to help international students.”* When international students were asked how they thought faculty members would describe them, good and hardworking were the most frequently used words: *“I think professors will describe me as a good and hardworking student.”*

International students provided examples of positive and negative interactions that they had with faculty members. These examples were related to academic and non-academic matters. Positive examples given by the respondents included professors explaining and answering students’ questions after class: *“When I don’t understand something during the class they always can teach me after class and that was very helpful.”* Another respondent mentioned about a positive interaction related to non-academic matters: *“One professor invited my classmates and I to have dinner and while we were eating we shared some cultural customs with him.”* An example of a negative interaction was: *“One professor was trying to encourage students to learn more about ...but she didn’t use the right words because she said: You are not smart because you are not learning the local culture. So that wasn’t good because it made us feel uncomfortable.”*

The students also described how they thought the interaction affected how the professor responded to them later and how their performance was affected due to the interaction. In some cases, the interactions resulted in students feeling more comfortable with faculty members: *“I think this kind of activities help professors to be closer to the students and help students to feel more comfortable when they are in class.”* In other cases, the interactions resulted in avoidance: *“I always tried not to meet him.”*

Summary of Findings

Faculty views international students as assets by bringing different perspectives and diversity to their classrooms. Despite the benefits, faculty also reported challenges that international students bring to the classroom: English language communication problems between faculty members and students, like misunderstandings or students not participating in class. Despite these challenges, overall faculty felt that international students were kind and hardworking. Positive interactions typically involved faculty members meeting students inside and outside the classroom for academic and non academic activities. These interactions improved the relationship between the faculty member and the student and also had positive effects on students’ performances. Some of the negative interactions were a result of international students not behaving or performing the way professors expected or due to cultural differences. The negative interactions affected students in both ways, positively and negatively. Some instances resulted in impairing relationships whereas others improved relationships. Some students’ performances were negatively impacted by the interaction but others were affected in a positive way, students becoming more responsible and active in class.

Overall, international students characterized faculty in a positive way. Students felt professors were “nice”, “kind” and “helpful”. Some students felt that professors would characterize them in a positive way as: “friendly” and “diligent”. The positive interactions described by international students referred to professors answering their questions, going to further explanations on a topic and using different teaching methods like a field trip that helped students to have a better understanding of the courses. Students felt that their relationships with professors were enhanced and that they performed better in classes. The negative interactions usually occurred when professors didn’t answer students’ questions, professors not planning their classes well, students not behaving the way professors like, or when students requested professors to help them in certain tasks like becoming their thesis advisor. Many students didn’t feel the interaction had a negative impact on subsequent communication with their professors. Some students felt the negative interactions had a negative impact on their academic performance but a few students reported an increase in performance after the negative interaction.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that faculty perceptions of international students are influential in international students’ lives, academic success and adaptation to Taiwan educational system. International students who had positive interactions with their professors performed better, became more confident and participated more in the classroom. Students who had negative interactions were more likely to decrease communication with their professors, escape their professors, which lead to experience impaired performance in the classroom, even resulting in students not going to class or dropping the course. However, some students who had negative interactions decided to change their attitude and work harder. One student stated: “When he warned me that I should be more responsible, I started to study more for the class and my performance improved a lot.”

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study has contributed to the understanding of faculty perceptions and their impact on international student adaptation, several limitations of the study encourage further examination. One limitation was that the study was limited to one university. The generalizability of the results is limited. However, some of the results were similar to the findings on previous studies conducted at other universities, supporting the possibility that the suggestions made in this study could be beneficial in other settings.

Since the study asked faculty and international students to provide their characterization of each other, their responses may have been guarded due to the position of the researcher. Many respondents may not have felt they could provide negative answers. The respondents may have avoided disparaging terms to describe either faculty or international students and didn’t express their true feelings about the other group. Another limitation was the population size of the participants. Some responses were not applicable because the respondents did not accurately respond to the question asked. Misunderstanding some of the question may have been the result of English language issues.

Despite these limitations, the current exploratory study makes a contribution toward understanding faculty’s perceptions of international students, how these perceptions influence international students’ adaptation, and how international students perceive faculty.

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