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Developing Intercultural Awareness for Better Peer Interaction: Study of a British University (0141)

Ming Cheng¹ *University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom*

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of intercultural awareness on students' interaction with peers in a UK university. Chinese postgraduate taught students and their peers from non-Chinese backgrounds are selected for the study to explore whether their experience of peer interaction is affected by their understanding of different culture and different approaches to learning. The distinct experiences of these two groups of students offer invaluable insights into the challenges that students often encounter in a multicultural learning environment. Using the intercultural awareness model proposed by Baker (2011), this paper presents perspectives into understanding the link between peer interaction and how students mediate and negotiate between different cultural frames of reference. It offers practical suggestions for universities to foster inclusive learning environments by increasing opportunities for students to practise and demonstrate intercultural awareness.

Keywords: Chinese students, intercultural awareness, learning approaches, peer interaction, postgraduate taught

Introduction

The development of intercultural awareness is a major factor that motivates many international students to study abroad (Altbach and Knight 2007), but the level of intercultural awareness on many international campuses appears as generally low (Hayward 2000). Chinese students are often stereotyped as passive learners whose learning is characterised as rote, silent and passive (Turner 2006). This indicates a need to prepare students to appreciate each other's different culture and learning approaches, especially when there is an increasing number of Chinese students studying in the UK, which has provided universities with opportunities as well as challenges in developing students' intercultural awareness (Iannelli and Huang 2014). This paper therefore investigates the impact of intercultural awareness on MA students' experience of peer interaction. Chinese students and their non-Chinese peers at a British university are selected for the study in order to explore and compare whether their peer interaction is affected by their understandings of different cultures and different approaches to learning.

This paper echoes the view by [Korzilius et al. \(2007\)](#) and [Longo \(2009\)](#) that intercultural awareness is important to successful learning and that students need to become aware of not only one's own culture, but also other people's cultures. Using the model of intercultural awareness proposed by Baker (2011) as a framework, this paper explores how Chinese MA students interact with their non-Chinese peers in the classroom and whether peer interaction has been affected by students' understandings of different cultures and approaches to learning. Chinese MA students and their peers in a British university are selected for study because there is an increasing number of Chinese students studying in the UK and their experience of acculturation remains issues to be solved (Wu & Hammond 2011).

Methodology

This research involves semi-structured interviews with 33 Chinese MA students and 16 peers from non-Chinese backgrounds at a British university. This university is selected as a 'representative case' (Yin 2014) for study, as it is well established in both teaching and research and has a large number of Chinese students. The student interviewees are from engineering and business studies, because these are popular subject areas among Chinese students (HEFCE 2014). A theoretical sampling approach (Punch 2013) is used to select these interviewees. Gender, age, and cultural background are considered.

Research ethics approval was carefully sought and granted before the data collection. NVivo software and thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) were used to analyze the interview data. Two research questions are explored in this project:

- How do MA students experience peer interaction at British universities?
- How have MA students' experiences of peer interaction been affected by their intercultural awareness?

Findings

Chinese students were commonly described as quiet in the classroom, and less likely to participate in classroom discussions. Four (8%) out of the 49 student interviewees described Chinese students as passive learners, citing a lack of contribution to classroom discussion. While this statement demonstrates a stereotypical association of Chinese students with passive learning, it also points to some awareness of the complexity of cultures. Many interviewees, especially those from Asia, point out that Chinese students engage in active learning through other means, such as discussing work with academic staff or friends in private or via email. This suggests that there is an awareness of the relative nature of cultural norms, as participants identify that active learning might be realised in different ways, going beyond classroom interaction.

Group work

Group work was an area in which interviewees observed differences in cultural understandings and practices, which sometimes led to tensions within the group. Peer interviewees reported that Chinese students appeared reluctant to take leadership within a group. However, some Chinese participants felt that this was caused largely by Chinese students' lack of confidence in their English language skills.

There are also comments which recognise a more fluid understanding of cultural behaviours. For example, a peer interviewee reports on how one individual may demonstrate different behaviours in different group work situations:

Chinese are not always quiet, when you have a group of five people, and four people are from different nations..., and one Chinese. This [Chinese] person starts to communicate brilliantly, and he speaks with everyone. But when you add another Chinese, like create a group of Chinese, they start to be quiet (Peer 9).

This comment suggests a more fluid interpretation of culture in which individuals move between different cultural norms.

Social interaction

Student interviewees also commented on the impact of cultural values and behaviour on social interaction. One observation is the tendency for students to remain in national groups rather than forming potentially intercultural environments. Despite a desire from both Chinese students and their peers for more intercultural interaction, barriers emerged.

Another key challenge was different cultural understandings of socialising, particularly around attitudes to drinking alcohol. Peer interviewees, especially home students and those from the EU, found it difficult to understand why Chinese students did not like parties and drinking, as they believed that these were important for making friends. These different thoughts about socialising appear to be a significant barrier for Chinese students to establishing friendship with their peers.

Most interviewees' accounts of their own experience and culture-related behaviours, together with their awareness of other cultures, is a strong indication of basic and advanced cultural awareness. Student interviewees encounter considerable barriers when attempting 'to mediate and negotiate between cultural frames of reference and communication modes' (Baker, 2011, 205) in practice. This paper argues that there is an urgent need for British universities to increase opportunities for students to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes that are essential in negotiating and mediating effectively in intercultural communication.

Conclusion

Baker's (2011) model has proved very useful in identifying basic and advanced cultural awareness in student interviewees' comments on different learning behaviours. Chinese student interviewees in general encountered great difficulties in communicating in group work and in forming friendships across cultural groups. This suggests that the university needs to achieve greater clarity in their agenda to increase intercultural awareness on campus in order to provide students with truly international learning experiences.