A Study on Countermeasures to Culture Shock

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Abstract: On the analysis of the symptoms and causes of culture shock our students encountered at Northumbria University in the UK, this paper puts forward the following suggestions to reduce the influence of culture shock: 1. for home universities, language skills and intercultural knowledge and skills training before going abroad is an effective measure; 2. for oversea students, to be open-minded and have a clear learning objective is the subjective motivation to integrate into the local social life as soon as possible; 3. For host universities, the efforts to create wider social activities are the necessary condition.

Introduction

In recent years, China and the UK are creating the closer relationship in culture and education exchanges and cooperation. According to data of the British Higher Education Bureau of Statistics, the number of students from the mainland of China who studied in the UK reached to 130,000 in 2015. It is up to nearly 20 times, compared to the number of 7,260 in 2005. The UK, with its language advantages, excellent quality of teaching, and advanced mode of education, is attracting more and more Chinese students.

With the global economic integration trend, study overseas has becoming one of the most important forms of the internationalization of education. What it brought to students is including the collision and conflict between different cultures. Due to the differences between Chinese and British culture, the Chinese students often need to spend much time and energy to adapt to the new study and life there. To analyze the experience of this group’s study in the UK, and to study the relevant countermeasures, have important significance for their better integration. With the working experience of recent years, esp. during the visiting in Northumbria University in the UK, the author investigated and studied the culture shock phenomenon experienced by our students in the UK through interviews, classroom tracking, daily observation and data query. Hope to benefit future intercollegiate exchange or joint training of students.

The Culture Shock Students Experienced in the UK and Its Reasons

Culture shock refers to the maladjustment phenomenon which a person experienced when he moved from its inherent cultural environment to a new cultural environment, including the confusion, depression, anxiety and loneliness etc. The greater the difference between the two kinds of environment is, the more serious of culture shock is.

Our students in the UK, in a relatively short period of time, need to cope with psychological pressure, language difficulties, social needs and academic pressures. Their adaptation to British culture similarly correspond to the LySgard’s U-shaped curve model of cross-cultural adaptation (LySgard, 1955): during the first month to the UK, due to freshness and emotional, they are in high level of adaptability; in the next 3 months or even longer, Sino-British cultural differences are
increasingly revealed, and the original values and working procedures are impacted, hence, frustration and homesickness gradually become serious, and their level of adaptation decreased; with adjustment and language level increasing, they gradually understand and agree with the British culture, begin to be able to independently deal with problems, and their level of adaptability, self-confidence get improved. They tend to be in a stable mood. During this process, the culture shock they experienced shows in the following areas:

**The Difficulties of Daily Life are the Primary Pressure of Exotic Survival.**

Currently, Chinese students, from an early age, are the family center and given the best care. They depend on others too much. When entering a new and unfamiliar environment, they will unavoidably face a lot of daily life difficulties, such as reading menu, understanding the dialect of bus drivers, how to go shopping, how to deposit money in a bank account or even how to cross the road and so on. In addition, the rainy and dark British weather also easily make people in depression, loneliness and homesickness.

**Language Barriers Leading to Unsureness of Themselves**

Before going abroad, many students thought to meet visa requirements of IELTS scores would be enough. As everyone knows, fresh language is very different from the test language. The author’s interview data show that the main difficulties of our students in the British life and study are caused by lack of language ability. In the daily life and social interaction, some students even deliberately avoid communication with the British. In academia, language affects students' understanding of the content of teaching, answering questions, participating in discussions and the successful completion of homework. Lack of language ability, to a large extent, dampened their self-esteem and self-confidence. Some students worried seriously, and even suffered from insomnia. “During classes, teachers talked very fast, using a lot of academic terms. And the discussion between students is more difficult to understand; Teachers also arranged a lot of reading materials after class, I often cannot complete such a large amount of reading.” This is one of our students’ words, and it is very representative.

**Lack of Cross-Cultural Common Sense and Difficulties in Making Friends Result in Their Loneliness and Autism.**

For studying abroad, it is very important to communicate with the local friends. But, because of different cultural background, it is not an easy job to get to know the British friends. How to interact with people, how to be a guest, to accept or reject the invitation, gifts giving and acceptance, and how to express gratitude and dissatisfaction, all have become new problems. The self-confidence in domestic social did not exist, just like fish out of the water. They always feel that they do not belong to here.

In addition, Chinese students are more subtle and passive. Despite the school and teachers are actively recommending, persuading and providing a lot of communication opportunities, many students are still reluctant to participate. This makes it more difficult for them to integrate into local life. For students who live in foreign countries, this feeling of loneliness makes them difficult to have a healthy and positive attitude.

Furthermore, the survey was informed that the Northumbria University hosts about 4,000 international students, among which, more than 1,000 are Chinese students, accounting for more than a quarter. Thus, Chinese students are easily confined to the circle of their own people. These objective conditions also prevent students from integrating into the local social life.

**The Difference in Study Habits and Learning Philosophy is an Important Factor in Their Academic Difficulties.**

During the classroom tracking, we’ve got to find that, in the study habits, our students cannot adapt to the British-style education of the discussion and self-learning methods. In a class with a lot of Chinese
students, the teacher is often headache with the boring atmosphere; and they rarely have their own unique perspective in homework, do not know the way to find reliable reference materials; and often have the idea of "looking for teachers to intercede" for the test results. Student Gao said: "I do not understand the British writing standards. In writing papers, I’m confused about the writing routines, reference routines in line with British academic standards, and I’m often angry that I did not dare to take the initiative in the classroom and answer questions."

In the concept of learning philosophy, the British teachers encourage students to think independently in the classroom, to have a critical spirit, the courage to express different views, and show great respect for students' thinking; in the way of academic evaluation, the British higher education evaluation methods are mostly process assessment. The students' final grades are decided by classroom display, group work, course papers and final examinations together. This requires students to work hard throughout the semester; in teacher-student relationship, it is necessary to make reservations with teachers. Our students are not accustomed to it, or even do not read Emails and answer the relevant questions in time. Thus, academic difficulties cannot get the teacher's timely help; some students do not understand the nature of the Student Welfare and Wellbeing Center, do not know how to ask for help properly, and make themselves in a difficult predicament.

The Analysis of the Contribution of Current Education to the Students’ Adaptability to Their Life in the UK

The Analysis of the Content and Teaching Methods of Current English Courses

Over the past 30 years, after a series of reforms, our college English teaching has achieved remarkable results, and students' English level has been significantly improved. However, some problems have become increasingly prominent.

First of all, the difference in the teaching content with high school stage is not significant. It largely results in duplication and waste. Part of the freshmen in our university has basically reached the CET4 level. For them, two years of basic college English teaching won’t achieve the purpose of improving language proficiency.

Secondly, the teaching content is far away from students' life and their professional knowledge. The main stream of college English textbooks content is still about British or American language or cultural background, involved very little of the commonly used expression and communication skills in the daily life; at the same time, students also cannot find any their professional related content. Both make students easily lose their interest in English learning, even affect following professional English learning.

Thirdly, language communication environment is lacking because of the large class size. Due to the relative shortage of college English teachers in our university and inadequate teaching allocation, small classes required by language teaching is difficult to achieve, resulting in the lack of effective communication environment; coupled with the requirements of CET4 and CET6, the College English teaching is still difficult to get rid of nature of the examination, split the English learning with real life.

The Analysis of the Cultivation of the Students Learning Habits and Academic Literacy

Learning habits need long-term culture. In terms of the learning consciousness, on college stage, study mostly requires to combine the classroom teaching with students’ self-learning. For our students, many of them are lazy for taking notes, lacking of active participation in class awareness, and unable to arrange their extra-curricular learning time actively. These are showed in their dependent on the copy of the teacher’s handout or downloaded courseware, without feedback to teacher’s interaction, the lack of reflection and exchange on teacher’s point of view, and not consciously completing information collection and reading required by the course.

In terms of learning motivation, they don’t have a clear purpose. In contact with students, it is often heard that they lost their goals and motivation after they went to university, and a large amount of time
is wasted in eating, playing, and sleeping. Students still do not know they should begin to plan for their future career as soon as they enter the university.

In terms of learning methods, with the continuous improvement of teaching hardware in our university, students’ learning begins to present a network trends. Although network learning has made it come into true for the global sharing of learning resources and breaking the boundaries of time and space, students' usage to the network has gradually changed to relying on the network. They lack exploration attitude to teacher's questions and homework, just "Baidu" (Similar to Google in China) it. To the real academic issues, however, they cannot tell which sites are reliable.

The Countermeasures to Weaken the Impact of Cultural Shocks by Multi-Party Coordination

Cultural shock and adaptation to it is the common experience of students studying in the UK. In order to alleviate the negative impact to the greatest extent, we should follow the objective laws and strengthen the training of related knowledge and quality.

Language Intensive Training in Home University

Language is the bridge of interpersonal communication. Students' ability to cope with cultural shock is fundamentally dependent on their English level. Before going abroad, first of all, students should pay more attention to the strengthening of English learning, and improving of English practical ability.

Currently, the preparation of our students before going abroad is still hasty. Most students do not begin to prepare for the IELTS test until their third year. So, we should find out the students' intention to go abroad in students enrollment survey, combined with students own will, setting 1-2 English classes esp. for study abroad purpose, to make English teaching more targeted. At the same time, the introduction of British English teaching methods is also necessary for targeted English teaching in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, esp. the targeted teaching of thesis writing. Thus will make our students not only achieve its language requirements, but also adapt to the British way of learning in learning methods, classroom initiative and ways of thinking in advance, so that students have been made emboldened to study abroad.

To Realize the Importance of the Training of Cross-Cultural Common Sense and Communication Skills

Trainings before going abroad often stress mostly on language, but seldom on culture. However, good English language skill does not imply equal cross-cultural communicative competence. Good content, well-designed cross-cultural knowledge and communication skills pre-departure training can make students well prepared practically and psychologically in dealing with British social life. Such trainings should cover:

1. To understand English culture and differences in advance. Many students do not have a basic understanding of British history and geography, customs, law and religion, climate and school environment. In addition, the systematic study of Chinese culture can not only help predict possible problems and conflicts, but also help understand the differences between two cultures.

2. Cross-cultural communication skills and their proper use. Intercultural communication skills are mainly etiquette learning, such as at what time, at what place and to whom, how to use verbal and non-verbal means to answer questions appropriately, including gestures, eye contact, distance, wording, tone, attitude and so on.

3. Similarities and differences of educational philosophy. That is one of the main reasons which affect the learning effect of our international students. Relevant training should be specific to the teaching and learning methods, learning skills and goals, homework and examinations, teacher-student relationship, academic writing, even library use and so on.

4. The training of independency and the ability to handle various things on their own. Before going abroad, there are complex specific matters to deal with, including: passport and visa application
procedures, the preparation for daily necessities, accommodation, communications, traffic safety and emergency knowledge, etc. The trainings also should guide students to complete it on their own.

**To be Open-Minded to Merge into the Local Social Life as soon as Possible**

It is the key cultural conflict problem for our students to solve to break through self-closed life overseas. At first, one can try to communicate with international students from other countries. Since English is also their second language, they will be more patient in communication. At the same time, one should also actively interact with the local British people, to understand and respect the British culture and customs. It will be very helpful for broadening horizons and eliminating cultural divide.

Therefore, if students want to have a positive experience of studying abroad, out of the Chinese community and participating in a broader social life is an indispensable choice. Student Yao has been relentlessly participating in the local community activities, and actively communicating with the outside world, her final study experience and satisfaction is much higher.

**To Clarify Learning Objectives, and Enhance the Sense of Study Responsibility**

At first glance of Northumbria University students’ timetable, there seem not many classes a day, and even one or two days of free time. In fact, students have quite great pressure on their study. Even during Christmas season, many students are doing a lot of reading, research, writing papers throughout the holidays. It reflects the characteristics of British education in terms of the teaching ways, requirements and assessment forms of the curriculum. From the curriculum setting and the assessment goal, it all serves for the final career planning and has a very clear purpose. This kind of study can really make students learning full of motivation and consciousness. Therefore, students should strive to develop self-learning ability, clear career goals, and increase learning purposes.

**The Efforts of the Host University to Create Broader Social Activities**

Many British universities are very international, and their international students come from various countries. How to encourage Chinese students to integrate with international students, and actively participate in social activities, both universities have the responsibility to create more suitable opportunities.

We have learned that Nothumbria University has done a lot of work in this area, for example, in addition to the freshmen education, and free professional English courses, there are also many activities and lectures about British culture for international students to participate in, such as hiking by Student Union, British food, a brief introduction of United Kingdom history by some faculties, etc.

We notice that some teachers of Northumbria University are very angry at the basic tenses, sentence order and other grammatical mistakes in Chinese students’ paper. But they do not realize that is due to the differences between Chinese language and English language. They may need to be trained to change some of the original teaching emphasis while teaching Chinese students. If the relevant teachers and service personnel have the chance to get the training on the Chinese culture and characteristics of Chinese language, it will be more quickly to ease the impact of cultural shocks, for both sides.

In addition, the University can also encourage students to live mixed up with international students, or to help students find homestay to improve their cross-cultural exchanges in quality and quantity, and have a deeper understanding of the British culture.

"International experience helps to develop students' personalities, broaden their horizons, enrich social knowledge and culture, and adapt to unfamiliar situations," said German scholar MJcehm at the 2004 Beijing Forum of Higher Education. "International experience can also help students improve their qualifications, foreign language ability, also help improve the employability and career in the international context.” (MJcehm, 2004) With the socio-economic development, joint training or student exchange programs open up a way for students studying abroad, which have become a new system project for colleges and universities, and raise higher requirements for our teaching content and teaching mode. How to adapt to the international practice and how to better serve for the
internationalization of our university’s talents education, the cross-cultural adaptability study is a subject that must be confronted.

References

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