The Challenges and Adaptation of Chinese International Students in U.S. 3+1+1 MBA Program

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Abstract. With the rapid economic and social development, more and more Chinese students go abroad to pursue their study. In some 3+1+1 programs in U.S., Chinese students even become the majority of MBA cohort. The conflict between the Chinese students and non-Chinese students occurs largely due to the cultural differences. This paper used the interview and observation methods to find the conflict in multicultural classroom and challenges Chinese international students faced and proposed some recommendations both for the Chinese students and also for the other parties concerned to solve the conflict.

Introduction

With the rapid economic and social development, China has become the second largest economy in the world[1]. Many middle class and upper-middle class Chinese parents are keen to send their children to study abroad, especially to the United States, the leading destination for Chinese students pursuing overseas studies[2]. The diploma earned in developed countries, like in U.S, is a glorious symbol of prestige, which is deemed superior to the equivalent degree earned at home. It is commonly accepted that in Chinese intellectual community people who have western knowledge and an experience abroad are more likely to get respected positions[3].

According to the Institute of International Education’s Open Doors® 2016, China has been the largest origin for students studying in the United States since 2009. In 2015-2016 academic year, 328,547 students from China were studying in the U.S., up 8.1% from the previous year. Chinese students have made a significant contribution to the U.S. economy. In 2016, Chinese students in U.S. colleges and universities contributed $11.43 billion to the U.S. economy [4].

The universities’ cooperation programs between China and the U.S. has increased, providing the students with various options to study abroad. In some cooperation programs like MBA program in U.S., the number of Chinese students has exceeded that of the local American students. As we know, MBA programs are mostly implemented by cohort, which can be broadly defined as "a group of students who engage in a program of studies together" [5]. There are three reasons for adopting the cohort model. From an economic perspective, it is economic efficiencies from fewer small classes[6,7]. From an administrative perspective, the cohort makes it much easier to schedule and track of individual students. From a pedagogical perspective, the cohort could foster the development of a cooperative learning [8].

The cultural distance between China and the United States, however, has been identified the largest [9]. Within a cohort, especially in the Chinese dominant U.S classroom, it is inevitable that conflict occurs due to the cultural differences. Chinese students speak Chinese and associate primarily with fellow Chinese students. Although some of them wanted to make friends with American students, Yan and Berliner (2011) examined in their study, “making good friends with Americans” and “successfully communicating with Americans” were the most difficult things for Chinese students to adjust at an American university [3]. While the American students were not satisfied with the Chinese student’s behaviors and performance or even unsatisfied with the
program. They complained to each other. The tension between the Chinese students and non-Chinese students in a cohort were getting intensive.

The purpose of this paper was to find out the cultural conflict reasons in the Chinese dominant U.S. classroom and to propose some recommendations both for the Chinese students and also for the other parties concerned to solve the conflict.

Method

The qualitative research method is used in this study. Informal individual interview and observation are adopted to explore the Chinese international students’ challenges and adaptation in the multicultural classroom.

Program Description

This study was conducted in a private university located in west coast of U.S.. The 3+1+1 MBA program is one of the international programs designed for the Chinese students studying in Chinese universities for 3 years and continuing their undergraduate program in U.S. for their fourth year, advancing MBA program for 1 year. During their first year in U.S. namely their last year of undergraduate program, all the students are free to take classes as they like, they thus are seldom confined to the same classmates due to the diversity of the classes. In MBA program period, however, the students both of the Chinese international students and the local American students enrolled after their graduation from undergraduate program take a number of courses in lockstep by cohort model. The university has had this kind of MBA program for years and the American students has been the majority for the last few years. Last year, the Chinese student became the majority of the MBA class. There were 12 students in MBA program including 7 Chinese students and 5 non-Chinese students comprising 2 Americans, 1 African and 1 Asian American and 1 Brazilian American. All the non-Chinese students are either American citizens or have been in U.S. for many years, who have been deeply influenced by American Culture, and English has become their native language. The cohort began in last August and completed in June this year for 11 months and the students were required to take the same classes, business seminar, company visiting, class discussion and small group work together. After a couple of weeks, the complaints and conflict between the Chinese international students and non-Chinese students occurred mainly due to the cultural differences. Non-Chinese students initially came to the director of MBA program to complain their concerns. Therefore, the study started by these complains and followed by observation and the informal individual interview with all students in a cohort and teambuilding activities every other weeks.

The research questions in this study are summarized as follows:

1) What are the complaints from both the Chinese international students and non-Chinese students?
2) What are the main challenges Chinese international students facing in their MBA program study?
3) How do the Chinese international students and some other parties concerned adapt themselves to their multicultural classroom to build a successful cohort to achieve their academic goals and interpersonal skills??

Data Collection

The researchers of these studies are the director of MBA program, the visiting scholar from China. Data were collected through informal in-depth individual interview followed some open-ended questions. All the MBA students voluntarily participated in the interview. In order to avoid the same situation happened in the following MBA program, the pre-MBA 11 Chinese international students voluntarily participated in the interview as well. All the interviews were recorded after their permission. Data were also collected by researchers’ observation in team building activities every other weeks and their daily life. All the data were taken notes, compared and analyzed afterwards.
The research lasted for half a year which the researchers had sufficient time to interview and observe, and the findings are worthy trust.

Findings

Complaints from both the Chinese International Students and Non-Chinese Students

Chinese international students were often complained by both the professors and the non-Chinese students that they were quite passive in the classroom. They seldom asked the professors any questions during the class like the American students did.

They didn’t give in-depth opinions in group discussion, occasionally they repeated what the American students said and sometimes they put little efforts in group work.

When the other students gave presentation in class, some Chinese international students sometimes showed disrespect by looking at their own computers or talking to the other Chinese students. When the professors asked the students to give the comments of the case study or other articles, it was silent at times after the non-Chinese students expressed their opinions.

When taking into consideration of the majority of Chinese international students, the professor tended to simplify the teaching contents and assignment, which non-Chinese students thought it unfair to make the coursework too easy for them.

While non-Chinese students, especially Americans were complained by the Chinese international students about their overconfidence and their reluctance to help Chinese international students.

The Challenges Chinese International Students Faced

The conflict between Chinese and non-Chinese students is largely caused by the cultural difference, especially by the Chinese students cultural challenges and adaptation. It is true that Chinese international students are more silent and inactive in the U.S. classroom, especially when they come to U.S. for their first two years. The reasons lie in the following factors: insufficient English, different educational system, lack of cultural context and lack of good communication with non-Chinese students in group work.

Insufficient English. Insufficient English is a major factor of the Chinese international students’ inactive participation in the classroom. Most of the Chinese international students stated that insufficient English hindered their study in U.S., even though some of them got high scores in TOFEL, IELTS, they could not completely understand what the professor said, what the American students talked about, what the video was about in their first semester. Therefore, they could not ask questions in class or give in-depth opinions in group discussion. Sometimes the Chinese international students had something in mind, but they were unable to speak it out fluently, they would rather put it simply than embarrass themselves and waste the other students’ time.

Different Education System. There are large differences in education system between China and U.S. due to cultural differences. In Chinese classroom, teacher is considered the authority and the students are generally expected to listen carefully to the teacher. If the students have any questions, they usually are required to ask the questions after the lecture or after the class. This interaction between students and teachers is considered to be respectful to the teacher and not to waste the other students’ time and most students are accustomed to listening without asking any questions during the class, unless being asked to answer the questions by the teacher. In the U.S. classroom, however, the teachers welcome any question at any time; the students can even challenge the authority of the professors. Accustomed to the spoon-feeding teaching style, the Chinese international students are uncomfortable to ask questions during class. If they don’t understand the teaching content or disagree with the professors’ opinions, they would like to discuss with the professor after class instead of speaking it out in public to embarrass both parties.

Lack of Cultural Context. The professors occasionally use some abbreviation in class, or use some articles or videos as course materials which Chinese international students lack of cultural context. They don’t know any background of these materials when presented in class, so they can
not involve themselves in the following discussion. It also can be observed that sometimes when the professor made a joke in class, all the American students burst into laughter, while the Chinese international students don’t get the point of the jokes. Lack of cultural context makes them learn not as much as they expected.

**Lack of Good Communication with American Students in Group Work.** Most Chinese international students find it not easy to make friends with American students, and communication between Chinese international students and American students is not adequate. Initially some of them tempted to blend in Americans community to make them adapt quickly, while due to cultural difference, insufficient English skills and few common interests, they preferred to get together with Chinese fellows eventually.

In the classroom when the Chinese international students sit together, they are used to speaking Chinese, which make the non-Chinese students feel left out. Even in small group work, they lack of effective communication, mutual understanding, which results in the inefficient group work and causes the complaints.

**Recommendations**

**Intrinsic Motivation**

Kohn(1993) insists that the intrinsic motivation is very important for students to learn and achieve and make them more likely to persist[10]. Chinese international students come to the U.S with the purpose of improving their academic achievement, improving their English level, broadening their international views, making more local friends, hopefully getting more job opportunities. If they keep in mind their motivation, they may be positive and open to any change and challenge they face. They will be eager to adapt themselves quickly to be an active member in the class and put more time and efforts in class and after class.

**Mutual Respect**

Mutual respect is critical for the multicultural classroom. Students are willing to learn from each other if they are in a climate of respect. Everyone is valued and feels comfortable and included. They feel free to express their authentic thoughts and show concerns about the other’s situation which comfort their anxiety. It is advisable for the students from different culture background to learn, understand and adjust to different cultures.

**Responsive to the Multicultural Classroom for American Teachers**

With the increasing Chinese international students in multicultural classroom, the American teachers are expected to be responsive to the diversity. Bennett Christine I. (2003) states that “The major goal of multicultural education is the development of the intellectual, social and personal growth of all students to their highest potential.”[11] Chinese international students’ challenges and adaptation are suggested to take into account when they are delivering the class.

Learning objectives of the program and norms of cohort and group work should be agreed and announced in the beginning of the class which every member should abide by. Providing some course materials ahead of time is expected by most Chinese international students to come to every class well prepared. In group work, some professors attempts to divide the group considering the gender, nation origin instead of random grouping, in order that the students of different culture can learn and help each other.

When Chinese international students find that some subjects are hard to understand, academic tutor is helpful, who tutors some students after class bilingually to make the students catch up with the class.

**Support from U.S. University**

Some Chinese international students believe that they benefit a lot from living in a host family where they can learn American culture and have a good relationship with host family. But not all the Chinese international students are so lucky to find a satisfactory host family. U.S. universities
are suggested to provide more information about the host families to accommodate them, where they can feel the real American daily life and improve their oral English.

Extra-curriculum activities, which are proved a good way to make American friends, are expected to be more available for the international students to reduce their feelings of isolation from American culture.

**Support from Chinese University**

More and more Chinese universities have regarded internationalization as a goal for their future development. Accordingly, Chinese universities should transform traditional teaching strategies and methods. English teaching should focus more on application-oriented, like speaking and listening rather than examination-oriented. New teaching objectives and student-centered teaching methods like class discussion, small group work, project research, and presentation are encouraged to be widely used in Chinese universities. Chinese university should also develop and deliver more bilingual classes using the popular textbooks in English to prepare the Chinese international students for their future U.S. classroom.

Before the students enroll the international program, they are supposed to be trained for cross-cultural communication and informed all the challenges, possibilities and differences to help students to have their own plan and expectation in advance.

**Conclusion**

The increasing trend of Chinese international students in U.S. classroom brings some challenges both for the Chinese international students and U.S. Universities and U.S. teachers. It is definitely true for the Chinese international students to adapt to their new environment, but U.S educators, Chinese Universities and American students play an important role as well to create a good learning environment, which is beneficial to all the students.

**Reference**


