

The Study of the International Undergraduate Students' Adjustment Processes in Taiwan

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Abstract

The study investigates six international undergraduate students' adjustment processes in Taiwan based on the theoretical framework of phenomenology. To understand these international students' adjustment processes, the researcher invited 3 students from Southeast Asia and 3 from Central and South America respectively for semi-constructed interviews. Three themes that are relevant to international students' adjustment processes emerged from the data: (1) motives and prior preparation before coming to Taiwan, (2) mental and physical adjustments in Taiwan and (3) posterior perception and observation after coming to Taiwan. Based on the themes, the research findings can be summarized as the following: (1) Personality, resources in Taiwan and environment are the factors that affect international students' adjustment processes. (2) International students' adjustment processes in Taiwan can be divided into three phases: learning process in Taiwan, mental adaptation process and immanent and extrinsic supporting system. (3) Cultural differences including language, schoolwork, interpersonal communication, eating habits and school system related to their adjustment difficulties for these students. Finally, to assist international students better, the following suggestions are offered for school authorities: (1) Provide part-time working opportunities on campus to decrease their living expense. (2) Make their living environment more convenient. (3) Provide detailed content of the enrollment session and learning guidance for international students. (4) Provide more cultural-related visits or activities for international students along with Taiwanese students. (5) Highlight the function of the counseling centers.

Keywords: international students, adjustment process

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Introduction

In the globalization era, there are more and more foreign people coming to Taiwan to study and international education is popular in schools. The researcher who has had the experience of working with foreign teachers and international students in Taiwan and once studied in Australia for five weeks is aware of the importance of studying the issue about international students. To understand the international students' adjustment processes and the factors that influence international students' adjustment in Taiwan, the researcher invited 3 students from Southeast Asia and 3 from Central and South America respectively for semi-constructed interviews.

Human brain has the instinct of self-coordination, including accommodation and assimilation (Piaget, 1964). And Arkoff (1968) thought adjustment is the interaction between individual and environment. According to Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory, the undergraduate students are facing the "Intimacy vs. Isolation" stage. If they feel lonely and have problems of making good relationship, that means they're unadjusted (D. P. Schultz & S. E. Schultz, 2008). Chickering and Reisser (1993) also brought out their opinion about psychosocial development. They said there are seven vectors: Developing Competence, Managing Emotions, Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, Establishing Identity, Developing Purpose and Developing Integrity.

Most undergraduate students expect for new life, like to take a risk and are eager for the freedom. However, because of the different life, environment and peers, they may encounter challenge and obstacles (Al-Qaisy, 2010). For the international students, they will encounter different kinds of "culture shock". They usually need social network to help them (Constantine, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005). Moreover, the curve of the cultural adaptation is like the letter "U" (Han, 2009; Huang & Lo, 1996) (Figure 1).

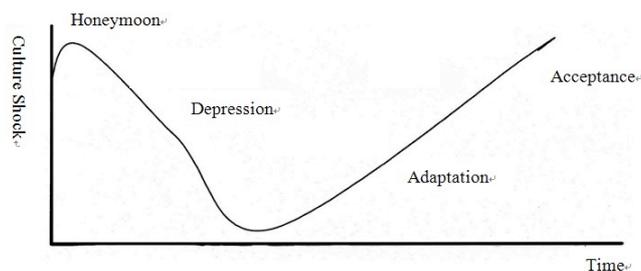


Figure 1: Cultural Adjustment Curve

Method

The study investigates six international undergraduate students' adjustment processes in Taiwan based on the theoretical framework of phenomenology. According to the percentage of the international undergraduate students in the southern part of Taiwan, top two with large proportion are students from Southeast Asia and Central and South America. So the subjects of this study are the international undergraduate students from Southeast Asia and Central and South America who come to Taiwan for the first time and have studied for more than one semester.

To understand these international students' adjustment processes, the researcher invited 4 students from Southeast Asia and 3 from Central and South America respectively for semi-constructed interviews (the student A is for the pilot study) (Table 1). Three themes that are relevant to international students' adjustment processes emerged from the data: (1) motives and prior preparation before coming to Taiwan, (2) mental and physical adjustments in Taiwan and (3) posterior perception and observation after coming to Taiwan.

Table 1
Participants' Data

symbol	assumed name	gender	nationality	age	year of arrival	Chinese background knowledge	experience of going abroad
A	Mark	M	Malaysia	22	2009	YES	NO
B	Ann	F	Indonesia	18	2011	NO	NO
C	Nick	M	Indonesia	18	2011	YES	YES
D	Mei	F	Vietnam	23	2009	YES	NO
E	Flower	F	Panama	23	2009	NO	YES
F	Aron	M	Guatemala	22	2008	NO	NO
G	Lin	F	Panama	23	2008	NO	NO

In order to increase the reliability of this study, the researcher uses triangulation approach with the College Students' Check List, the data of interview and the interaction between interviewees and the person in charge for international students' affairs. After doing semi-constructed interview, the researcher analyzes these data on the basis of phenomenological content analysis by following steps. First, try to describe, classify and compare the units of general meaning. Second, cluster the units of relevant meaning and focus on the context to find out the common theme or essence. Third, decide the themes from cluster of meaning. Finally, describe the contextualization of themes.

Results

According to the data of this study, the results can be divided into three parts. First, the international students' motivations of coming to Taiwan come from the scholarship, their intension to study abroad and their parents' or teachers' encouragement. Before they come to Taiwan, some of them have the background knowledge of Chinese, Taiwan and the subjects they'll learn. These will help them to adjust the new environment. Next, the external factors that affect the international undergraduate students' adjustment in Taiwan are language, study, environment, culture, diet, economy, and relative affairs at schools. Furthermore, there are two types of the mental adjustment processes after coming to Taiwan: (1) be homesick- be lonely- feel pressured- like and accept the environment. (2) be excited- be homesick- be lonely- be depressed- feel stable with time. No matter how long they've stayed in Taiwan, the learning and adjustment processes and the supporting systems are similar. Last, the international undergraduate students are more mature and have changed after studying in Taiwan. For example, they are more independent and have courage and confidence. They also learn a lot about the subjects, language and culture.

To sum up, the vectors of the international undergraduate students' adjustment process and the ways they adjust are illustrated in the Figure 2.

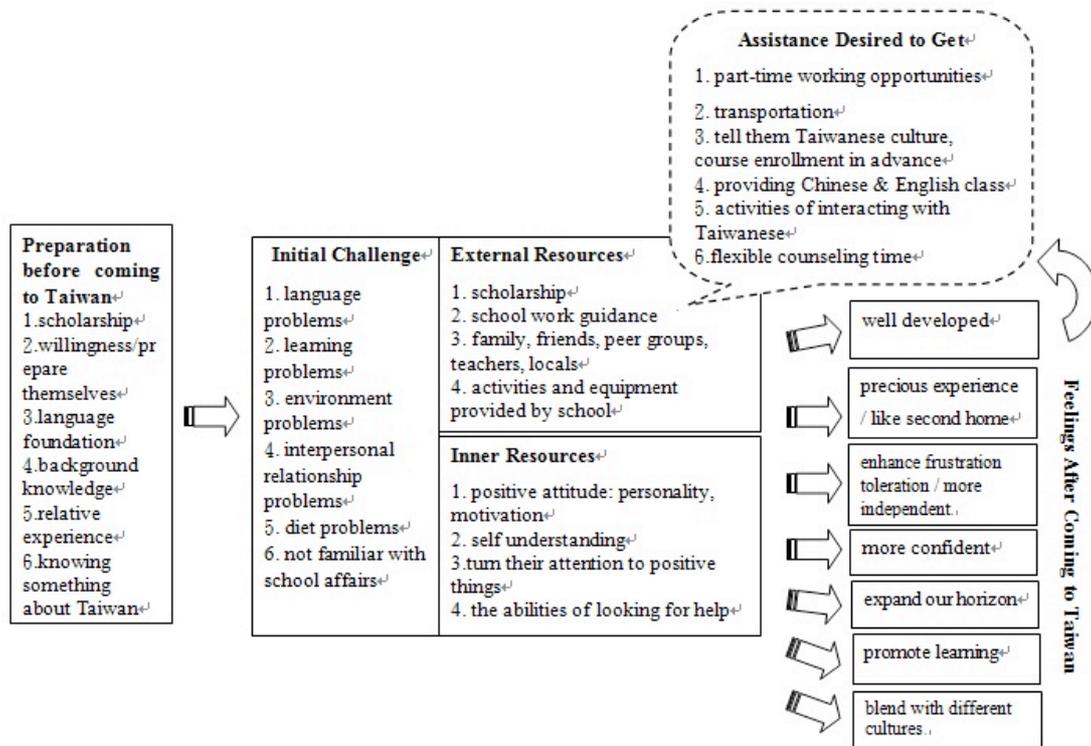


Figure 2: International Undergraduate Students' Adjustment Process in Taiwan

Conclusion

Based on the themes, the research findings can be summarized as the following: (1) Personality, resources in Taiwan and environment are the factors that affect international students' adjustment processes. (2) International students' adjustment processes in Taiwan can be divided into three phases: learning process in Taiwan, mental adaptation process and immanent and extrinsic supporting system. (3) Cultural differences including language, schoolwork, interpersonal communication, eating habits and school system related to their adjustment difficulties for these students.

Finally, to assist international students better, the following suggestions are offered for school authorities: (1) Provide part-time working opportunities on campus to decrease their living expense. (2) Make their living environment more convenient. (3) Provide detailed content of the enrollment session and learning guidance for international students. (4) Provide more cultural-related visits or activities for international students along with Taiwanese students. (5) Highlight the function of the counseling centers.

For future research, the study can be explored more thoroughly by interviewing students from the same country or recruiting students from various countries for cross-cultural comparison. Moreover, compile international students' adjustment scale and increase more research with quantitative and qualitative approaches. Last, using students' native languages in interviews to build up the researching relationship for in-depth information.

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