



REVIEW

English for International Purposes: Guidance for Chinese Students on an Oversea Sojourn

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ABSTRACT

English has been widely used for various purposes and the number of students studying abroad has mushroomed in recent years. This article focuses on the preparation an overseas sojourn for Chinese students to practice English as an international language for intercultural communication. The article also reviews some literature to explain the process of intercultural acculturation and explore how to maximize the culture learning. Finally, the implications suggest that students should prepare for the sojourn in advanced to identify the culture difference, simulation games could also help students to improve their intercultural awareness and facilitate them to be adapted in the new cultural environment.

1. Introduction

The number of young English learners participating in study-abroad programs has been dramatically increased in recent years, particularly for those who take part in short-term sojourns. At the same time, many teachers and educators believe that studying in different cultures might automatically improve L2 proficiency and intercultural competence. However, inadequate preparation and unpredictable expectations may have detrimental effects on sojourners, students could return home with negative stereotypes of the host culture (Allen, Dristas, and Mills 2007)^[1]. This article explores the theoretical possibilities to prepare the Chinese students on an overseas sojourn and provides some suggestions to help these students to maximize the intercultural learning as sojourners.

2. Context

This study was carried out in a private language training school in China. The class consisted of 20 Chinese students who came from local primary school and most of students are around 10 years old. Instead of teaching English as a subject or passing different types of examinations, the language training school aimed to enhance learner's ability to communicate with others in L2 particularly in speaking. During each class, teachers would use different pictures, illustrating stories and cartoon movies as learning materials to practice their listening and speaking and only English was allowed to use in classroom. By the end of each term, students were required to attend an oral test to show how well they are doing in language school. The students in the class were intermediate level

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and most of them were willing to express their idea, they also intend to use L2 to talk with teachers during recess. However, there is a limitation of classroom where the range of discourse and environment students are exposed is limited (Krashen, 1982)^[2]. Most of these students have never been studied abroad and barely have chance to communicate with foreigners. It should be noticed that culture plays a significant role in language teaching and learning. This is because culture is an important element affecting the pragmatic, semantic and discourse level of the language and culture is embedded in many lexical phrases in English (McKay, 2003)^[3]. For instance, one phrase could have different meanings and usage or various expressions for the same meaning through different culture context. Therefore, it is essential to raise learner's awareness of culture and we should move English teaching in classroom to teaching English at international level so that they could communicate with English speakers all over the world. This article focuses on preparation for Chinese students on an overseas sojourn where English is used as an international language and also provide some suggestions to enhance the culture learning.

3. Theoretical Possibilities

3.1 English as an International Language

English is a language spoken widely all over the world and has been considered as the main link language across cultures today (Schnitzer, 1995)^[4]. The position of English is described as three concentric circles (Kachru, 1985)^[5]. The Inner Circle comprises of countries including Britain, the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand where English is the major and official language and dominates the use in both public and private situation. The Outer Circle consists of more diverse group of countries, for instance, India, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. In these countries, English may be an official language and play a dominant role in some areas such as administration, education and press. Here English is perceived as an internal lingua franca to assist people to connect the wider world. The last one is the Expanding Circle, constitutes of the rest of countries where English is used as foreign language that taught as a subject in schools and this may improve learner's international competence and provide more opportunities to be employed in the international company. However, criticism is made of the rapid and invasive expansion of English because of the cost of other languages and scholars may call it 'killer language' (Pakir, 1991)^[6]. It has been claimed increasing that English is spoken by more people as their second language than as a mother tongue. As a result, English is

no longer exclusive for native speakers, but shared by English-speaking community (Widdowson, 1994)^[7].

Without any doubt, English has been spread to many parts of the world and used for various purposes. One of the indications in the global expansion of English is English as International Language (EIL), which English is used among speakers from different national and cultural backgrounds, particularly in the Expanding Circle countries (De Costa, 2009)^[8]. Within this context, EIL is established to refer to the current uses of English all around the world, particularly involving non-native speakers interacting with other non-native speakers and native speakers in English. The role of English as international language has brought enormous changes in language teaching filed today. McKay (2003) suggests that language teachers should focus on learner's own culture and provide them the opportunity to share with other speakers of English. Dendrinos (2001) asserts that learner should be able to transfer L1 to L2 freely in EIL contexts^[9]. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to promote these skills rather than teaching in a monolingual communicative situation.

4. Sojourns for Chinese Students

It is widely agreed that most sojourners will experience some culture shock during the very start of stay (Kim, 1988)^[10]. Culture shock is defined as anxiety when losing all our familiar symbols of social communication, and their substitution by other cues that are strange (Oberg, 1960)^[11]. Many symptoms of culture shock are physical illness such as social isolation, homesick, loneliness, low self-esteem and so on. There are some external factors may cause culture shock such as weather and food differences, accommodation, language, discrimination and different education system (Adelegan & Parks, 1985)^[12]. Researchers have developed some models to predict who suffers most from culture shock. Topping and Todman (2008) advocates three theories in this area: Stress and Coping, which means sojourners need to use coping strategies to deal with all kinds of stress; Culture Learning including learning social skills to survive in the new environment; Social Identification involving cultural identity and intergroup relations^[13]. These theories may tell people how culture differences practice and procedures lead to misunderstanding for sojourners.

Another related term is Intercultural adaptation which happens when people move from their home cultures to new and unfamiliar culture environments, and they intend to establish the stable relationships with that environment (Kim, 2001)^[14]. The process of intercultural adaptation has been divided into four stages (Lysgaard, 1955)^[15]. The sequence of adaptation works in U-shaped curve that

starts with a period of excitement at stage 1. Then people go through the period of crisis at stage 2 and a period of coming is the engagement with new environments (stage 3) up to adjustment in stage 4. Intercultural adaptation also occurs in specific dimensions. Searle and Ward (1990) claim two forms of adaptation: psychological and sociocultural [16]. Psychological adaptation involves to stress and coping processes while sociocultural adaptation is associated with culture learning experience (Ward and Kennedy, 1996) [17].

Culture learning has been defined as the process of acquiring the culture-general and culture-specific knowledge required for effective interaction and communication. There are several factors affecting culture learning. Attitude and motivational have impact on language and culture learning (Masgoret, 2003) [18]. one of the most reliable factors for sojourners in new cultural surroundings is through their interactions with local people. Effective communication skills and the ability to build intercultural relationships could influence sociocultural adaptation significantly (Hannigan, 1990) [19]. Klineberg and Hull (1979) consider that active interactions with the people from host community to be essential condition for sociocultural adaptation [20].

5. Rationale for the Study

5.1 Intercultural Acculturation

Intercultural acculturation is regarded as the process of intercultural adaptation which the ways the individuals create to maintain stable and reciprocal relationships with the unfamiliar cultural environments (Mumford, 1998) [21]. The acculturation model presented in Figure 1 (adapted from Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001) [22].

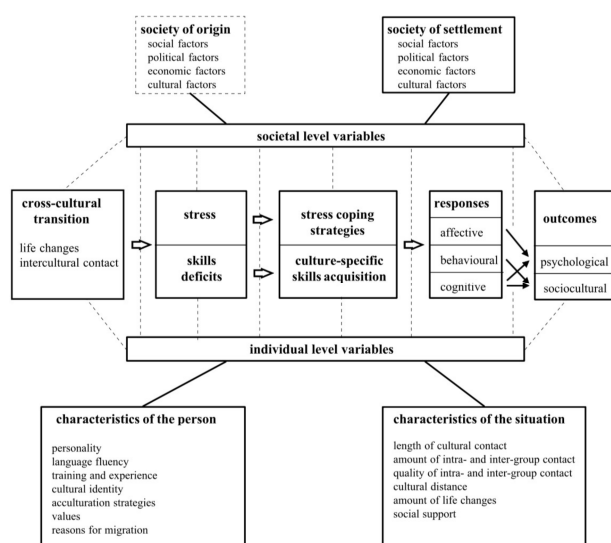


Figure 1. The acculturation process (adapted from Ward, Bochner and Furham 2001)

The acculturation model aims to establish the links between stress coping strategies and culture learning, and differentiates psychological, sociocultural and cognitive outcomes. This dynamic model considers cross-cultural transition as life changes or significant event. The major challenge the individuals will be facing in cultural transition is the intercultural communication skills, and the responses are involved in affect, behavior and cognition for stress-adjustment and communication skill acquisition, as a result, there emerge the psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation. From the micro-level perspective, personal factors such as personality, language fluency, training and experience, cultural identity are all important for the individuals. From the macro-level perspective, society of origin and society of settlement are also significant for individuals and social, political, economic and cultural factors are all relevant. However, the relationship between students' educational adaptation and sociocultural and psychological adaptation needs to be further discovered.

5.2 Intercultural Sensitivity

Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) believe that if someone intend to be adapted effectively in new culture, they must be sensitive enough to notice the cultural differences [23]. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) focuses on people's awareness and response to cultural difference and related to ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism (Bennett, 1993) [24]. The former one is involved in 'the world view of one's own culture is central to all reality' and the latter is about 'being comfortable with many standards and customs' and 'ability to adapt behavior and judgments to a variety of interpersonal setting'. Ethnorelative is perceived as the effective one to promote the skills and knowledge for successful intercultural communication and adaptation in new cultural environments (Bennett, 1993). The aim of the sojourn is to enable learners to become ethnorelative as they achieve intercultural competence. Sojourners who reach the ethnorelative stage of development could recognize more cultural differences. For instance, most students may have no idea that people are required to take off shoes before they enter into some temples in Thailand and they could be offensive unconsciously. The sojourn experience would raise learner's intercultural sensitivity which make more aware of cultural difference.

5.3 Intercultural Communication Skills

Another benefit from this sojourn is to develop learner's intercultural communication skills. There are several fac-

tors which affect the intercultural communication skills. Dignes (1983) considers flexibility and open-mindedness is the key element for successful communication skills^[25], Ting-Toomey (1999) suggests that the need for high tolerance of ambiguity may affect^[26]. Personal strength and stability are essential traits for communicators. Other elements such as problem-solving abilities and positive attitudes are treated as necessary component to develop intercultural communication skills. In Thailand, students have an abundance of opportunities to contact with local people, understand and learn the culture of the host country through daily life.

5.4 Language Learning at International Level

The transformation of English from the language of countries such as UK and US to become the international language has brought great changes for language learners (Liurda, 2004)^[27]. They need to adapt to the new EIL environment, especially in the situation where two non-native speakers communicate in English. When students stay abroad, they may encounter the situation that they need to communicate with non-native speakers, they may not understand each other. Therefore, it is important to develop their negotiation skills and it is also crucial for learners to be aware of the cultural difference. In addition, language awareness is perceived as 'explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning and language use' (Garrett & James, 2000) which is related to the culture awareness^[28]. As an international sojourner, learner should draw attention to the relationship of a language in the social context. When students study in abroad, they need to notice the use of English in the host country and how others think when they speak English.

5.5 Culture Shock and Homesickness

When young students go abroad to study, they may meet some new people with different backgrounds. The main problem that learners may encounter is the culture shock which is defined as the anxiety when losing the familiar symbols of social intercourse (Oberg, 1960). Culture shock is considered as a serious and sometimes chronic affective reaction to a new environment. Several factors may cause this such as language, separation from home, status change or accommodation (Adelegan & Parks, 1985). They may have some academic difficulties as well. This is because not only linguistic difference but also learners fail to understand at a cultural level. Students probably are confused about the teaching pattern comparing to their own situation as Blue (1993) explains

that academic success would rely on the assimilation of the norms of learning culture^[29]. On the other hand, some learners may experience 'homesick'. Fisher, Murray and Frazer (1985) find that homesickness is associated with cognitive failures, negative attitude or handing in work late which has significant influence on their academic performance^[30].

6. Discussion and Implications

To make sure that students could access to the local culture in host country, teachers could design some courses in advanced which assist learners to identify the difference between their own culture and culture in host country. Activities such as: readings, observation and watch the relevant videos related to culture aspects. Contacting with host people could facilitate students' adjustment. (Westwood & Barker, 1990)^[31]. Kashima and Loh (2006) find that having personal ties is important to help students gain better adjustment psychologically^[32]. It is also effective to allow students to interview exchange students from target country in English which could build their confidence and encourage them to speak freely. Additionally, peer support is useful to help students adjust in new environment (Andrade, 2006)^[33]. If some students feel lonely or homesick, their peers could offer them encouragement and help them adjust in the new environment.

Besides, some simulation games will be given which may improve learner's intercultural awareness and facilitate them to be adapted in new cultural environment. This is because simulations supply a safe setting where participants can take a risk in what they behave to minimize the danger of being harmed and they have opportunities to use the different identity to interact with their peers. Students may start to notice some individual differences in the new context which could enhance their intercultural communication skills and be well prepared for the sojourn.

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