The Socio-cultural Adaptation, Openness to Culture and Success of Sojourn of Foreign (Japanese) Students in Tarlac City, Philippines

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Abstract

A number of researches indicate that living in another country may create different and unexpected adjustment problems, and foreign students are not exempted from this. To provide an understanding of this process, 30 foreign (Japanese) college students studying English in Tarlac City, Philippines were asked to answer questionnaires. This is to determine their sociocultural adaptation, including their openness to the host culture and success of sojourn. Through statistical analysis, it was found that the students experience greater difficulty in the academic area. Slight difficulty was attributed to majority of everyday life and social interaction items. Albeit difficult, what they like best is the method of teaching English while the areas that need improvement are the library set-up and internet connection. The only significant relationship was found between sociocultural adaptation and success of sojourn. Negatively correlated, if students experience greater difficulties in their host country, they are likely to regret their stay and will not recommend it to anyone. Openness to the host culture did not have an effect on the sociocultural adaptation and success of sojourn. The short period of time that the students have are spent in studying rather than making friends. Nonetheless, this indicates the need to look deeper into the academic, extra-curricular activities and facilities provided by learning institutions.

Key words: sociocultural adaptation, openness to culture, success of sojourn, Japanese students, Philippines
1. Introduction

The increase of globalization has transformed the national boundaries of education in the world. With the advent of ASEAN integration in the Philippines, educational institutions are encouraged to accept foreign students not only to foster global and cultural understanding but also to boost academic and economic exchange. Based on the data provided by the Bureau of Immigration Statistics (Philippines), the number of foreign students in the country increased from 26,000 in 2011 to more than 61,000 in 2012. This signifies the growing presence of foreign students in the country.

Students cite varied reasons for the decision to study abroad: the field they want to study is not available in their country, the desire for a new learning environment, love for adventure (Wiers-Jenssen, 2003), positive stories about study abroad from other students (Langley and Breese, 2005), desire to learn another language, interest for a specific culture and reconnecting to one’s roots. The reasons are as diverse as students themselves (Iversen, 2009).

Tarlac City, Philippines had been opening its arms to foreign students through English Learning schools for the past years. During the first semester of 2014-2015, an educational institution in Tarlac City served 40 Japanese college students as they prepare for their TOEFL, TOEIC or IELTS exams. More students coming from all over the world are expected to arrive each year to learn English or take other courses. Study periods often take two months to two years, depending on the needs and personal preferences of the students. Therefore, there is a need for educational institutions to assist foreign students as much as they can, for students do not only deal with academic concerns but also social and cultural demands during their sojourn.

2. Literature Review

Literature shows that studying abroad and its implications to the psychological or psychosocial well-being of students has been one of the explored fields of study. When students enter a foreign culture to study and live for a certain period of time, they are exposed to a lot of experiences. Lazarus (1999) mentioned that students have to face stressors such as riding public transportations, standing in line, making purchases, and often, the expectations students have from home cultures do not really match that of the host culture. From the sociocultural perspective, Ward and Kennedy (2001) revealed that students would have to learn new skills and sometimes alter practiced skills in fitting into a new culture based on past experiences. Also included are booming and sometimes confusing cultural clashes, as well as the excitement and challenge of being in a foreign world (Matsumoto et al., 2004); not to mention language barriers, immigration difficulties, culture shock and homesickness (Sumer
et al., 2008). Many researches have revealed that foreign students encounter more difficulties than domestic students do (Furnham, 2004).

Depending on the personality and coping skills, students adapt differently to new cultures and situations. Berry (2004) enumerated strategies sojourners often use to adjust. The strategies consider the sojourner’s identification with both home and host culture. The most beneficial, according to Berry, is the Integration strategy wherein the individual positively identifies with both sets of culture.

De Jesus (2009) looked into the role of acculturative stress experiences in the academic and social adjustment of Korean students in the Philippines. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, a negative relationship was found between acculturative stress and both academic and social adjustment. There was also a significant relationship between academic and social adjustment.

In the same year, Iversen (2009), whose paper was the guide for this research, explored the role of friendships in the social adjustment of international students. She explored the role of preference for co-nationals as opposed to making friends with locals or other cultural groups. Psychometric self-report survey questionnaire was used together with a modified version of the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale of Ward & Kennedy (1999). A Success Scale, a Co-national Scale and an Openness Scale were also created. 265 Norwegian students studying abroad were the participants of this study, and results showed that a preference for co-nationals was related to a higher amount of experienced difficulties and a lower level of success.

Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) looked into the adjustment problems of Iranian students in Scotland. Although the university has a welcoming environment, they found the importance of sojourn’s expectations and the role of religion in cross-cultural adjustment. Moreover, the study revealed that students relied on spiritual rather than practical support. This means that students get strength more from significant others and friends. Their study also emphasized why pre-arrival information, better accommodation and the provision of improved support for finances and employment are essential.

In 2003, Nguyen Thi Thanh Tuy studied the cultural adjustment of Vietnamese students in the Philippines. The descriptive correlational method and the purposive sampling technique were employed in the study. The subjects were 120 graduate and undergraduate Vietnamese students chosen regardless of marital status, age, gender, or vocation. Data were collected from demographic information and four standardized instruments namely: Cultural Adjustment Survey, Cope, Acculturation Orientation, and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Results revealed that most of the respondents applied integration strategies and a few respondents used assimilation as the predominant strategy when put in
contact with a new culture; none of the respondents was seen to be adopting separation and marginalization as predominant strategies. To handle their problems, the respondents acknowledged that they usually used the approach styles, followed by seeking social support, acceptance, and the last was avoidance style. The majority of the respondents attained a high level of adjustment in three areas: general living conditions, interaction, and school demands regarding adjusting to a new culture and environment. The respondents who applied integration strategies and/or approach styles classified themselves at the level of being well adjusted; those who used assimilation strategies and/or seeking social support and acceptance styles reported themselves at the level of being moderately adjusted; and those who utilized avoidance as a coping style were only at the slightly adjusted level. It was also found that language proficiency, cultural similarity, length of stay in the host country, and social support from friends are associated with cultural adjustment.

The inability to adjust to a new culture may have definite unpleasant psychological effects on the individual that may result either to academic failure or sociological problems. A prolonged cultural-adjustment period can cause foreign students to drop out of institution before completing a program or take considerably longer to complete programs than domestic students. Even though data on retention rates of International students are not as available as enrollment statistics, Tompson and Tompson (1996) suggest attrition rates are high. It can be wise to presume that students studying abroad go through extensive adjustment stress because not only do they make the educational environment transitions, but also they are trying to adjust to life in a new country. Institutions are encouraged to provide support and assistance to foreign students until they graduate so as not to reduce social and private rates of return that usually come from the social and academic success of the students.

3. Methodology

The study used the correlation research design in identifying the relationship among the variables. Pearson Product Moment Correlation with the significance level set at .05 was used to establish relationship among sociocultural adaptation, openness to culture and success of sojourn.

The population for this research was the Japanese foreign college students in Tarlac City during the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015. A total of forty (40) students were asked to answer the questionnaires. Thirty (30) questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 80 percent. Interviews followed to verify and look deeper into the answers given by the respondents.

3.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the sociocultural adaptation of the Japanese students in Tarlac City. Therefore, it aimed to determine the sources of difficulty in their
sociocultural adaptation, their openness to the host culture (Philippines), and the success of their stay. The study will also identify the relationship (if any) among sociocultural adaptation, openness to the host culture and the success of the students’ sojourn.

3.2 Data

A modified version of Sociocultural Adaptation Scale by Ward & Kennedy (1999) was used, while the Success Scale and Openness Scales were constructed by Iversen (2009). The questionnaire was organized into four parts: The first part was the demographics. This takes into the account the age, gender, nationality, subjects studied, and length of stay of the foreign students in Tarlac City. The second part was adaptation of Sociocultural Adaptation Scale by Ward and Kennedy (1999). It is divided into three parts: School /Academic Life, Everyday Life and Social Interaction. The original scale has 41 items, but was for this study shortened to 18 items. 26 of the original items were removed, three new ones were added and some items were rephrased. This was done to make the questionnaire shorter and also to make the items more applicable to students studying abroad. Respondents were asked to indicate how much difficulty they experience in 18 different areas, using a five-point scale (1-5: no difficulty, slight difficulty, moderate difficulty, great difficulty, extreme difficulty). The third part was developed by Gunn Iversen in 2009: the Openness to the Host Culture Scale and the Success Scale. The Openness Scale consisted of four items asking about positive attitudes to local people and their language. Respondents were asked to respond on a five-point scale (1-5: completely untrue, somewhat untrue, neither true nor untrue, somewhat true, very true). The fourth part of the questionnaire was a Success Scale with a four-point scale (1-4: not at all, a little, quite a bit, very much).

4. Results and Discussion

In this study, 16 respondents (53%) were 18-24 years old, 8 (27%) were in the age group of 25-30 years, and only 6 (20%) respondents were in the age group of 31 above. Also, 18 (60%) were females; 12 (40%) were male. 24 (80%) of the respondents have been staying in Tarlac for less than 4 months while the 5 (20%) remaining had been studying for five to seventeen months.

The students who participated in the study had the following characteristics: the majority of the students were females, college level. At the time of the administration of the questionnaires, most of them were in their second and third month of stay in Tarlac City, studying English for up to four months. The longest time spent was identified as seventeen months (one year and five months).

The majority of students were single whose schooling was funded by their families; therefore it was supposed they would be more likely to return to their home country after
completing their study period. The age of most student respondents tend to be nineteen and above.

Table 1: Sources of difficulty in the Social Adaptation of Japanese students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>STD. DEV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.5333</td>
<td>1.10589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.2000</td>
<td>1.27035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.8000</td>
<td>1.32353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.6333</td>
<td>1.47352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.6000</td>
<td>1.00344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.6000</td>
<td>1.56690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.5000</td>
<td>1.10641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.5000</td>
<td>1.45626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4333</td>
<td>1.27802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4333</td>
<td>1.93526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4000</td>
<td>1.00344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4000</td>
<td>1.37966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI3</td>
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<td>2.4000</td>
<td>.85501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4000</td>
<td>1.40443</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1 shows the fifteen highest sources of difficulty in the Academic Life (AL), Everyday Life (EL) and Social Interaction (SI) which are all under the Sociocultural Adaptation of the respondents. It indicated that the top two sources came from the academic settings, and the next two that followed were from the everyday life. Six out of fifteen sources of difficulty came from academic/school life while those from Everyday life came in a close second.

The data reveals that students gave the rating of “Slight difficulty” to the majority of the items indicated in the sociocultural adaptation questionnaire. Their sources of difficulty came mostly from academic life, the greatest of which was “Writing up papers that can earn you good grades” which earned 3.53 (Great Difficulty), but the rest of the items had mean scores falling under the category of Slight Difficulty. For them, some stressors were important (Academic) while majority of the items hardly registered as stressful at anytime during their stay (i.e. dealing with homesickness, etc.).

The result of correlation coefficient between Sociocultural adaptation and Openness to host culture was $r=+.343$, with a significance level of 0.05. The correlation between Openness to host culture and Success of sojourn was $r=+.392$.

Findings indicated that there is a significant negative correlation between sociocultural adaptation and Success of Sojourn. This means that as Japanese students experience greater difficulty in their environment, chances are, they would consider their sojourn unsuccessful, thereby not recommending it to others.

Openness to host culture almost had nothing to do with their success of sojourn. Many of the students spend only up to four months in Tarlac City as they study English, so they have
little chance of becoming familiar with the place and locals before their departure. Failure in studying English has bigger ramifications back home. When asked about this, one of the respondents said that “I came to the Philippines to study English; I have very little time to accomplish this goal. So while I’m here, I need to study and not do anything else”.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The results indicated that the foreign students experienced minimal difficulties based on their answers in sociocultural adaptation questionnaire. Sociocultural adaptation is negatively correlated to Success of sojourn. For this reason, the minimal difficulties experienced led to the notion that their stay is successful.

Surprisingly, what they considered as great sources of stress or difficulties (such as academics) are the same things that they appreciate, since it is completely different from the way they do things back home. Smaller number of students per class, one – on- one sessions and more focused attention from teachers are challenging but perceived by students themselves as productive aspects of their learning. The respondents consider their sojourn successful, would consider doing it again, and would advise friends and relatives to study abroad (even in the Philippines).

When asked what needs to be improved for the sojourn to be better, most of the respondents answered “Wi-Fi connection and library set-up”. These are two major areas that institutions need to look into, for students rely heavily on internet connection for communication with families, research work and compliance of grade-level tasks. As what the female teacher mentioned, “Internet is very important for them. When the connection falters, they always come to the office to inform us.”

This study was conducted with Japanese students and the narrowness of this sample means that conclusion may not generalize to other nationalities. Japanese students may be different from other nationalities in ways that are significant for the outcomes of this study. There are more Japanese females who study in Tarlac than men, but not as many as in this sample (60%). The sample consisted of significantly more females than males, and therefore may not be representative. A large sample covering a wider number of cultures would be helpful.

However, the study recommends that there is a continuing need for educational institutions to provide adequate support for the cross-cultural problems that foreign students experience upon arrival. We need to look not only at the students, but also at the adjustment process for clues that help students respond positively to the cultural issues that they may face. Often, language support programs, supplemental support for major courses and mentoring activities will be beneficial to students.
Foreign students may view the same experiences in varying lens. Their perceptions are influenced greatly by past experiences, present circumstances and their expectations. Nonetheless, on the part of the host culture or institution, it would be helpful to ensure that technical, academic, social and psychological support is readily available for students. Like what Okorocha (1997) has said, “they should ensure that departments and institutions are seen to be giving overseas students value for money. This satisfies the overseas students and pays dividends in the long run because a satisfied customer is the best possible marketing agents for acquiring new students.”

This study is exploratory and needs refinement and replication in the future. Future researches may include variables such as age and personality factors, academic performance, language skills, emotional regulation, monthly assessment of adaptation and coping strategies.

References


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