Conference Paper

Challenges of Foreign Students’ Cultural Adjustment to Indonesian Culture and Impacts on Their Academic Achievements

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Abstract

As an English course to prepare for International Teachers College at the University of Pelita Harapan, the English Pathway Program (EPP) caters students coming from various countries, such as China, India, Nepal, East Timor, and Kenya. These students stay in a campus dorm and meet daily in the same class for a year before entering their academic program. This paper attempts to synthesize and analyse challenges of foreign students’ cultural and academic adjustments in the first year of their stay in Indonesia, particularly at Karawaci, Tangerang. It is a qualitative study with the data taken from focused group interviews, questionnaires, observations, and documents. The subjects of the study are twenty two students. The setting of time was the academic year of 2017/2018. The results of the study indicate that foreign students undergo a few challenges in order to be adjusted among others are language, weather, food, education system, social relations, and way of thinking. The results on their academic achievements indicate that they are on the average grades. It implies that the university hosting international students need to provide a conducive atmosphere, service and environment for these students to adjust well in order to contribute to their academic success.

Keywords: cultural, adjustment, academic, and achievement.

1. Introduction

Students studying in a foreign country expect that their stay will be pleasant, successful and meaningful. It is undeniable that each foreign student has to undergo cultural and academic adjustments prior to settle and be familiar with a diverse culture and educational system. A profound learning process any foreigner needs to adjust is addressed by Michael Paige (1985). The learning process encompasses cultural and societal complexities; national and cultural differences; the host culture diversity; and unfamiliar behaviours, values, beliefs, ways of thinking and problem solving. Foreign students may need some time to be competent and effective in the new culture.
Paige then elaborates stages foreign students need to encounter in their cultural adjustment. First is what he calls the “honeymoon” stage, in which students feel the excitement and enthusiasm about being in the new country. They are curious and excited about staying in the new culture. Second is what Paige calls the “initial interaction and confrontation” stage. Students start to be puzzled when trying to communicate with host people, and it makes them confused frustrated. Third is what is called the “adjustment crisis” or “culture shock” stage. Students feel exhausted in trying to adjust to the new culture and from using the foreign language. They feel very homesick and in need of being with people from their homeland. Some may be depressed and in doubt to eventually “feel at home” in the host country. Charles and Stewart (1991) agree that adjustment issues for the students can be a source of frustration and disappointment, and a challenge for student academic performance. Loneliness, homesickness, language difficulty, discrimination, financial problems and depression are the adjustment problems experienced by many international students.

Fourth is called the “recovery and adaptation” stage. The students start to recover from negative feelings of anxiety, frustration, and depression by understanding other people’s way of thinking and doing things differently and getting along with people in the host country. By improving their language ability and feeling better, the students have learned about the culture and can function effectively. At this stage, they feel the personal growth by living and studying in another country as well as a sense of personal satisfaction and accomplishment.

Hull (1978) adds with his theory on foreign students’ adjustment well-known as a U-curve. The adjustment seems easy at the beginning, but it is followed with a “crisis” in which foreign students do not feel quite fully adjusted but lonely and unhappy. Then they start feeling better adjusted and more integrated into the foreign community’s values, behaviours and attitudes.

Cultural sensitivity is a vital element to advise international students. Attitudes of genuine caring and interest on these students as individuals are necessary. It involves an opening mind to different world views and seeking a deeper understanding of anyone’s world view. International students are well aware of the meanings of nonverbal and verbal cues that convey intolerance and discomfort.

Cultural adjustment plays a significant role for foreign students before getting involved academically. The adjustment process differs from one person to another depending on the students’ sensitivities to cultural differences and open-mindedness so that they can understand the differences in order to adapt both culturally and academically in the host country.
The purpose of the study is to find out the ways in which foreign students taking the English Pathway Program (EPP) adjust to the Indonesian culture and academics, and to find out their academic achievements.

2. Method

The research method used is qualitative as the data collected were in the forms of words (Cresswell, 2008). The research design is based on “grounded theories”. It is concerned with theory generation through discovery of how participants perceive the world and through an analysis of those perceptions (Sharman and Webb, 1995). Its aim is similar to “phenomenology” as a way of “mapping” qualitatively how people perceive, conceptualize, and understand experience. Therefore, the aim of “grounded theory” is to discover new insights. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (in Hutchinson, 1995), grounded theory functions to explain and predict a group behaviour and offer a new problem approach problem. The data gathered and analysed are contextual because participants are studied in an interview using their own experience. The interview permits the researcher to achieve a full understanding of the participants’ experience.

Spradley’s theory (1979) in which he mentions about ethnography as the work of describing a culture is applied. Its purpose is to understand and grasp another way of life from the native point of view. The study is ethnographic as it deals with various cultures. It is about cultural adjustment of people from different cultures and its purpose is to document exactly what happens (Le Compte and Preissle, 1993). The data collected and the written results are in the form of words containing quotations from the data to illustrate and substantiate the presentation. The data are from focus group interviews, questionnaires, and field notes (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

3. Findings and Discussions

This chapter contains research findings based on the questionnaire, focus group interviews, and field notes. The questionnaire attempts to find out students’ adjustment process and how it contributes to both academic achievements and inter-cultural relations. There are 20 students coming from 5 different countries. They arrived in Indonesia in July 2017 to attend English courses called the English Pathway Program for a full academic year of 2017/2018 at the University of Pelita Harapan, Karawaci, Tangerang before joining International Teachers College, a four-year undergraduate program.
3.1. Adjustment problems

Based on the result of the questionnaire, students needed to adjust on their language (20), food (19), education system (13), social relations (12), weather (11), and way of thinking (8), housing (2) and clothes (1). The first challenging adjustment is language. Rosa, a Chinese student, was aware that her English was not good. So she was afraid to talk and Indonesian language was really difficult for her. She did not know how to communicate with local people, especially when she wanted to buy something. As for Alicia, the language and social relations were quite difficult. For example, in her own country, she was able to speak Chinese to express something that she wanted to say, but here she had to speak her broken English. When she bought vegetables in a market, she paid in a high price because she could not speak Indonesian. Prakhi, an Indian student, also thought language was the most challenging adjustment because here people mostly do not speak English. He faced problems in a mall, hospital and when traveling.

The second challenging adjustment for students is food. Most Chinese students have a problem to adjust with the Indonesian food. Amy stated, “The food here is very different from my country. There is no soup and the meat is very dry.” For Danile, another way of cooking and seasoning made him uncomfortable. Emilia did not like fried chicken and anything fried, but he had to eat. As pork is her favorite food, it is hard for her to eat chicken only. Rebecca thought that the food was very spicy here, different from her country. Rose added that the food was also very sweet. For Indian students, Indonesian food is very different from theirs. Damine said, “The Indonesian food which I eat is dry, but now I am getting used to it.”

For a few Nepali students, food has become a challenge as well. Rachel elaborated as follows:

“The restaurant food is ok but the food we get to eat is not so good. We don’t get soup and it is kind of sweet. In our country, we don’t eat sweet cooked food. Some of them we eat, but we don’t eat daily. Another thing is that we don’t get water for free when we go to restaurant here.”

For Bham the food has a completely different taste, way of cooking and smell. As food was the most challenging adjustment for Grace, it made her homesick about a month. For Wycle who is from Kenya, Indonesian food is very different from his homeland. “It is difficult for me to adjust with the food because the meal is different from what I used to in my home country.”
The third adjustment problem is the education system. For Prae, a Nepali, the education system was the most challenging in her two months. “Education here is tough for me, and my English is not that good either.”

The fourth adjustment problem is social relations. Debora from East Timor thought that social relations were the most challenging adjustment. It was really difficult for her to adjust to a new environment and society due to the different cultures. She added, “For example, when I want to start a conversation with somebody it is quite difficult because I don’t know how they will react.”

The fifth challenging adjustment is weather. For Elisha, a Chinese student, weather was the most challenging because it was totally different from her country. In China there are 4 seasons, but over here there are only 2 seasons. In addition Gracia from Nepal added, “The Summer season in Indonesia is hotter than the summer season in Nepal. It was difficult to adjust as well. I got skin allergy because the weather was different.” Bham added that Summer was too hot here compared to the one in Nepal.

The last challenging adjustment is the culture. For Talia, an Indian student, living among various cultures needed a lot of adjustment. Also, every culture had its own way of acting and doing.

3.2. Coping with the adjustment

The students find ways to cope with their adjustment problems. First, to adjust with the weather, Alicia daily drank a lot of water. Second, to adjust with the food, Emile tried to cook by herself. Whereas Leah bought and cooked raw materials. Sometimes she had the food provided in the basement and added more spice. Besides cooking by herself, Amy ate more fruits. Third, to adjust with the language, Amy tried to learn it, and Alice practiced her speaking skill. For Debora, who used Portuguese language, the Indonesian education system is similar. Fourth, for social relations, Alice went to the market with her friends who can speak Indonesian. Danile had the following idea, “I can’t change the environment. So I just change my mind.” Debora wanted to be self-reliant and tried to do what she could. Finally, for the time adjustment, Rosa spent her time with God. that made her relaxed and focused on His way. Prakhi realized that Indonesia was one and a half hours ahead than India, and he had to adjust his sleeping time. As her house chore, Talia used to clean on the most free time, avoided others’ interference, and tried to be patient and polite. Whereas Bham did not go out during day time and preferred to be inside in cool rooms, and bought some spices to cook.
3.3. The length of adjustment time

The length of foreign students’ adjustment was 1-2 weeks for 3 students (14%), 2-4 weeks for 9 students (42%) to 1-2 months for 9 students (42%), and 4 months for 1 student (0.2%). Six Chinese students had to adjust for 1-2 months, and the other 3 students needed to adjust for 2-4 weeks. Amee said, “I am using my peaceful heart to accept the environment.” Aside from two other Indian students who needed to adjust for 2-4 weeks, Talia had to adjust for 4 months. She had the longest cultural adjustment. She said, “Not everything is very different from my culture but the problem of adjusting here is living among students from more than 15 cultures.” Nepali students’ length of adjustment varies from 1-2 weeks to 1-2 months. For Rachael, she had no problem in adjusting, but for Gracia, she needed 2-4 weeks to feel adjusted. She said, “Because a culture depends on food and language, it was hard to cope with new food taste.” The longest time to adjust was experienced by Bham as he needed 1-2 months and said that everything was new. Two other Nepali students also needed to adjust for 1-2 months. Debora needed to adjust for 2-4 weeks. She said,” The Indonesian culture has [is] not much different from mine as we got the same food and the benefit [that] I know how to speak the Indonesian language.” Wycle needed to adjust for 1-2 weeks. He said, “I have just accepted everything.”

Compared with the education system in the students’ home country, the following are what the students’ experience on both education systems. For Chinese students, teaching methods are an important issue. The difference is that in Indonesia Elishe feels that students are allowed to give suggestions. Amy also thinks that students-teachers’ relations are different, although the density of the curriculum is similar. Rosa even states that grades mean a lot in China. but they are not in Indonesia. Leah adds that in China, students and teachers more focus on the grade of mid-term test and final test, but not the daily expression. In Indonesia, the class is flexible and teacher really cares about students. Here is what Emilia thinks about the education system in China and Indonesia: “The education system is totally different between China and Indonesia. Students are passive in China, and only the teacher teaches, on the other hand, we always discuss and have an argument here. I like the education system here.” In Alicia’s opinion, both of them use multi-media in the class, but the intonation between students and teachers in Indonesia is better than that in China. Another student says that the school system in the home country is very strict especially about the discipline in class.

Coming from countries with a lot of similarities, students from India and Nepal have similar opinions in regards to education system. According to Damine from India, the
education system in her home is like spoon feeding. In Indonesia, students need to be independent by ‘thinking on their own.’ Prakhi adds that students have to memorize a lot of things. Talia also adds,”Here the education system uses more technology such as computer rather than in India. For students coming from Nepal, there are a few differences between their home country and Indonesian education system. Gracia states,” in our country final exam result determines that you will go to [the] next class or not but here every semester you need to pass then only you will be able to go [to the] next class.” Although having the same schedule and grading system, there are more scopes for studies in Indonesia. Bham adds that in Nepal students must memorize everything and read a lot. Similar to Indonesia, Rachel can choose a shift to attend classes, either morning or afternoon..”If we choose [in the] morning, it will be from 6-10 or 11 and we can have [a] whole day for ourselves. We can do jobs to earn money.” These students attend the EPP courses for one academic year, but there are around 3 students who have previously attended the International Teachers College (ITC) but had to take the EPP courses. Here is what Rachel said,” In ITC most of the teachers are native English speakers and they speak fast. In my country, [there is] no English speaker there. No use of much vocabulary in my country. So, here they use new vocabulary which I find hard to understand.”

They need to adjust on a few things. First is their daily schedule (11 students or 55%). There are 5 Chinese, 2 Indian, 3 Nepali, and 1 Kenyan students who addressed this need. Second is instructor’s teaching method (10 students or 50%). There are 4 Chinese, 1 Indian, 4 Nepali, and 1 Kenyan who addressed this issue. Third is curriculum (8 students or 40%). There are 2 Indians, 4 Nepali, and 1 East Timorese. Fourth is grading (7 students or 35%). There are 1 Chinese, 2 Indians, 3 Nepali, and 1 East Timorese who experienced this problem. Fifth is books/reference (8 students or 40%). There are 2 Chinese, 2 Indians, 2 Nepali, and 1 East Timorese who mentioned this problem. Sixth is medium of Instruction (5 students or 25%). There are 1 Chinese, 1 Indian, 2 Nepali, and 1 Kenyan, The seventh problem is is Instructors – Students’ Relations (4 students or 20%). 1 Chinese, 1 Indian, 2 Nepali. The last problem is Lesson Contents (3 students) consisting of 1 Indian, 1 Nepali, and 1 Kenyan.

As they were taking English courses of Grammar, Listening and Speaking, Reading, and Writing, they had to be in class everyday. The following are the students’ efforts in adjusting to the Indonesian education system: For Chinese students, their efforts include practicing speaking and making a study habit. As their first language is entirely different from English both in writing and speaking, they need to adjust more. Another student preferred to spend time by learning all new things, and another student reviewed before
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and after classes. Alicia, however, stated the following: “For me, I am not good at listening and the practice in the class. Therefore, I practice by myself.”

Indian students, who have more exposure to English compared to Chinese students in their home country, put efforts academically as follows: For Damini, started to learn more vocabulary words. For Prakhi, he followed his daily time schedule properly and became consistent in things to do. Likewise, Lalita took notes of the instructors and posted on her bed or a visible place for a reminder. Nepali students have also done the following efforts to adjust to the different education system from their home country. Bham followed his seniors and asked teachers how he could do better. Gracia was more concerned with time management and assignments. Likewise, Rachela made a habit of studying and managing time tables. For Pray, she was trying to focus and do homework first then any other things she wanted to reward and motivate her. Debby, on the other hand, paid attention more on lessons and did a research on the subjects. Whereas Wyclife, already felt adjusted, tried to do his best.

3.4. Students' Academic Achievement

Students’ academic achievement ranges from C to B+. The students were aware that their academic achievements were not optimum. Students received C (4 Chinese and 1 Nepali), B (4 Chinese, 2 Indians, 3 Nepalis, and 1 East Timorese), and B+ (1 Chinese, 1 Indian, 2 Nepalis, and 1 Kenyan). For a few Chinese students, the academic achievement was unlike what they expected. Alice said, “Not exactly, because I already tried my best to do it. However, the grade isn’t the only standard to measure the achievement of a student.” For Elisheba, some of her grades are higher than C, but the average grade is C. Also, Amy said that the score reflected her daily endeavor. A to Lea, the grade reflected her my average level. Rosethought that she could do better, and she needed to work hard. Emile agreed that her grade was based on her quiz or exam results. Students from India, who have higher grades (B or B+) stated the following: As her average grade was B, Damine said that she was aiming for B+. On the other hand, Prakhi always achieved B+. Talia agreed that her grade reflected her highest achievement and he could see the improvement. Whereas Nepali students achieved diverse grades from C to B+. Gracia thought, ”I don’t think this has reflected my highest achievement.” Rachel was also unsatisfied with her grade, “I can do better. I just need to have time for my study.” Similarly Prae said, “No, because I still want to achieve more.” Debora explained, “Now, I don’t really put high achievement into myself because I will definitely feel disappointed.
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if I didn’t get it. So, I just try my best and whatever grade that I get I am happy with it.” It is similar to Wycle who said that he needed to achieve more.

Here are some plans from the students to improve their academic achievement. For Chinese students like Amee, she was planning to read more books to improve her reading level. It applies to Rosa, who planned to read extra books and listen to English news or watch English movies besides managing time to study. Emile preferred reading a lot. In addition, Lea planned to spend more time on study. Alicia’s strategy was to make her time management reasonable, to read more valuable books, and to speak about knowledge from books. Damine and Prakhi also read more books and maintain reading habits. Talia, however, planned to be attentive and try to do things early.

Nepali students have plans to improve their academic achievements. For Gracia, she planned to study hard and do assignments. For Bham, he wanted to follow the Indonesian educational system. Rachela tried to make a habit of studying and managing time. Pray would like to challenge herself to do more exercise from media. Likewise, Wycle wanted to strive for his academic excellence. Whereas Debora said, “First I will read more about the subjects or make other notes from different sources. Second, I will review the subject after I study, it might be at night time.”

It is interesting to find out whether the students socialize with other students from their home country and other countries noting that there are students from 17 countries in a dorm. Students who prefer to socialize with those from their own country have these reasons: Amy stated, “I socialize more with people coming from my country because of having the same cultural background. Another reason is others do not openly accept others.” Rosa explained why she chose to socialize with other students from China [her home country], “Yes, socialize with students coming from my home country because they can understand me more.” Bham from Nepal said, “I prefer to socialize with my friends from my own country because we can share and understand each other’s happiness and sorrow.”

Debora addresses an interesting reason why she spent her time mostly with friends from her own country. “Most of the time, I spend with my friends from my home country as we have the same culture and language. It’s so little time to spend time with friends not from the same country as I don’t know what to talk to because [of] the different culture and language. So it makes narrow topic to talk.”

Other students socialize with students from any country. Chinese students like Elishe said, “Yes, I want to build a relationship with them. So, I will spend time with them like shopping together, hanging out, eating, etc.” For Rosa, communicating with those from other countries made her study their culture and practice her English skill. Emile
sometimes swam with her friends who are from other countries. Leah socialized with all around her, and she felt that she had learned a lot from them.

Indian students spend their time with both. Damine’s reason was because there was only one other girl from her country. Prakhi spared time with both, but mostly with those from his home country because of culture differences and people did not want to talk. Talia socialized with anyone around her. For example, when she was in the room, she socialized with her roommates, and when she was in the study hall she socialized with everyone who was around her and from other countries,

Students from Nepal also socialize with those from other countries. Gracia said, “When I have spare time I socialize with both [from] my home country and other countries too.” Rachela also said that when she socialized with others from other countries, she got ideas and suggestions. Whereas Prae socialized with those from her own country and sometimes with other countries depending on what she was doing or what she I had to talk about. Wycle hung out with and asked for help from others from other countries whenever he was free.

After completing the English course, the students who passed the TOEFL test and an interview would resume their study at the International Teachers College (ITC) program. It is expected that they would stay for 4 years to complete their study. As the objective of their study is to produce teachers who would teach all over the world as the students come from diverse countries. It is interesting to know that they did not always mention their home country as the destination plan to work after completing their study. Mostly they would like to be teachers. For example, Damine stated, “I want to become a primary teacher, and I want to teach the growing generation. I want them to know the truth.” Two other Indian students would also like to return to India. Prakhi said, “My vision is to build a school in India and serve as principal. I also want to serve among slum areas in India.” Likewise, Talia stated, “My vision is to go back to India or wherever God calls me to be a teacher and equip students to grow in thinking not by feelings as they do their education.” Also, Bham said, “I want to be a Christian teacher in my village to educate people.” Prae, another student from Nepal also said, “I want to be a challenging teacher because in Nepal, study is not so challenging and has no critical thinking.” Rosa, stated differently, “ After completing my study, I will stay here and to be a teacher to teach students. I want to use my love, knowledge and resource to help different people and let them know God’s love. Maybe will build myself team to help people.” A student like Lea from China planned to pursue a higher level of study and take part in the postgraduate entrance exams.
A few students did not mention their home country as their final destination to work. Gracia stated, “After completing my study I would like to be a good and God fearing teacher.” Rachela also said, “After completing my study, of course I’ll be a teacher and earn money. I’ll also want to help children get good education and let them know God’s love.” Debora stated, “I will probably be a teacher. I would like to give my best to my students not only teach them but sharing opinion and feeling as a friend or even best friend.” Wycle had the same plan, “My plan is to be a well-trained Christian teacher who is ready to transform my society through education.”

Knowing their adjustment process they have experienced, there are a few suggestions addressed to the university in order to ease their adjustment and stay. For Chinese students, the following suggestions are addressed to the university. Amy suggested to provide a family or supervisor who can build a close relationship with them. Rosa also gave a suggestion that the university build different clubs, which will be a good way to relax and study. Students from India gave suggestions to the host university as well. In Damin’s opinion, the university needed to always encourage the students because they were away from home. Prakhi said, “University should make a community to help international students in learning Indonesian.” Talia also suggested that they were allowed to meet and talk to some of the seniors who already studied at the university.

It was interesting to know Nepali students’ suggestions to the university. For Gracia it was important to learn Indonesian language and manage her time. Bham thought it was necessary that the university understood the students’ background in educational system. Prae suggested to do research on cultures and provide pre-information about Indonesia. Gracia suggested, “Since we only have academic education in ITC and does not have divisions like art, music, and sport, we cannot be involved in that kind of activities. If we are interested or good at them, at least we can improve our extra-talent through that.” Rachela, on the other hand, had an interesting suggestion:

“What I experience is that in graduation, ITC students were also graduating but it was all in Bahasa. Since ITC students were involved, they should be allowed to involve in MC, holding of different flags (for example, China flag should be held in Chinese.) There should be different clubs so that we can involve in different activities.”

Debora also had a different suggestion, “The first time you come to study with a variety of nationalities, of course you will feel not good as your culture is not the same but remember that God put you here with a reason so keep going in every situation that you go through because God is with you.” She added, “Teachers need to pay attention
to quiet students and spare time. Teach English to them so that they can speak English with international students.”

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This study concludes that in order to adjust in Indonesia, the foreign students coming from China, India, Nepal, East Timor, and Kenya had to meet challenges. Language, food, weather, social relations, and education system are most of their adjustment. To overcome the problems, the students used various strategies such as cooking by themselves, attempting to socialize with others, drinking a lot of water in a hot weather, and learning Indonesian language, Problems in adjusting culturally, resulting in lower grades. They are unfamiliar with the education system, especially the curriculum, class schedule, teaching methods, interactions between teachers and students, and teacher’s medium of institutions. To overcome their problem, their ways vary from reading a lot, learning vocabulary, asking friends, and preparing early. Based on the findings and analysis, it is suggested that foreign students need to put enough efforts to outreach themselves to know the host culture and people from other cultures they are staying with. As for the host university it is necessary to pay attention to the importance of foreign students’ adjustment to a foreign country and to provide an appropriate and needed orientation upon their arrival.

References


