Chapter 6
Encountering Unfamiliar Educational Practices Abroad:
Opportunities or Obstacles?

Jane Jackson
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

As internationalization efforts intensify across the globe, the number of students who are studying outside their home country for part of their tertiary education has increased significantly. The vast majority of students from East Asian nations (Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Korea, Macau SAR, Mainland China, and Taiwan) study in a second language while abroad, with English the most common medium-of-instruction. As institutions of Higher Education (HE) in other regions compete for students from this part of the world, increasingly, questions are being raised about what students gain from outbound mobility programs. Scholars have drawn attention to the need for systematic empirical research that critically examines the experiences of student sojourners in order to determine the most effective ways to support and enhance their learning (e.g., linguistic, cognitive, social, academic, (inter)cultural, and professional).

INTRODUCTION

As internationalization efforts intensify across the globe, the number of students who are studying outside their home country for part of their tertiary education has increased significantly. The vast majority of students from East Asian nations (Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Korea, Macau SAR, Mainland China, and Taiwan) study in a second language while abroad, with English the most common medium-of-instruction. As institutions of Higher Education (HEIs) in other regions compete for students from this part of the world, increasingly, questions are being raised about what students gain from outbound mobility programs. Paige and Vande Berg (2012), Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012), and other education abroad researchers (e.g., DeKeyser, 2014; Jackson, 2012; Kinginger, 2009) have drawn attention to the need for systematic empirical research that critically examines the experiences of student sojourners in order

to determine the most effective ways to support and enhance their learning (e.g., academic, cognitive, (inter)cultural, linguistic, professional, and social).

This chapter centers on a study that investigated the developmental trajectories of undergraduates from a Hong Kong university who took part in a semester-long international exchange program. While many elements of their experience have been examined, this chapter largely focuses on their evolving perceptions of and attitudes towards educational practices in their home environment and abroad.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As this chapter explores the academic (non)integration of Chinese students who are studying abroad, the literature review encompasses several areas, namely: acculturation and second language socialization; transition shock; and 'cultures of learning' with particular attention paid to second-language sojourners.

Acculturation and Second Language Socialization

Acculturation is the term used to refer to the changes that can occur when people are in sustained contact with individuals or groups who have a different cultural background. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) described it as:

[T]hose phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups... under this definition acculturation is to be distinguished from cultural change, of which it is be one aspect, and assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation. (pp. 149-152)

More recently, Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis and Sam (2011, p. 464) defined acculturation as 'changes in a cultural group or individuals as a result of contact with another cultural group'. This contact may bring about changes in both parties (e.g., student sojourners as well as host nationals), especially in individuals who are open to new ideas and behaviors.

Within the context of border crossings, Berry et al., (2011) viewed adaptation as the process whereby individuals employ strategies to cope with the experiences and strains of acculturation. Some scholars distinguish between psychological adaptation (nurturing a sense of personal well-being and self-esteem) and sociocultural adaptation (competence in dealing with everyday life in the larger society) (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Acculturative stress refers to 'a negative psychological reaction to the experiences of acculturation, often characterized by anxiety, depression, and a variety of psychosomatic problems' (Berry et al., 2011, p. 465).

When intercultural contact involves more than one language, acculturation may encompass second language socialization, that is, the process by which newcomers become familiar with the linguistic conventions, sociopragmatic norms (e.g., verbal expressions of politeness), cultural scripts (e.g., common greetings and responses in social interactions), and other behaviors that are associated with the new culture (Duff, 2010; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Newcomers who make an effort to gain an understanding of social, cultural, and linguistic elements in the host environment may develop more self-awareness and intercultural communicative competence, that is, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in a second language with individuals who have a different linguistic and cultural background.

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