Going to China and Studying EAP: The International Student Experience

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Abstract. Chinese universities are hoping to attract more and more international students to study on international programs. Most of these courses are taught entirely in English and many students study EAP alongside their degree subject. This article looks at recent research into the international student experience; what motivates them, how they can adapt to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) study in China and how they can build their intercultural competence. Key findings from a study of the experiences of international students at a Joint Venture university, Xi-an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), are then highlighted.

中国的大学希望能吸引越来越多的国际学生来其所开设的国际项目学习。大多数课程都是全英语授课。除学位课程外，很多学生还学习学术用途英语（EAP）。本文着眼于近期关于国际学生学习体验的研究，分析其学习动机、如何在华适应学术英语（EAP）的学习及如何能够建立跨文化交际能力。本文重点呈现一项关于国际学生在西交利物

Introduction

China has embraced the concept of globalisation whole-heartedly. Products made in China are exported worldwide, and on modern Chinese streets, international brands are now commonplace. The world of Higher Education is no exception to this phenomenon. Universities in China currently have a vast majority of native Chinese students, but they are actively looking to attract international students in order to improve their internationalisation credentials and tap into the predicted market of 7-8 million international students worldwide by 2025 (Ball, 2012; Jackson, 2012).

Internationalisation of Higher Education in China

Internationalisation is seen in China as a way to improve academic standards, particularly in the fields of management, international trade, law, and computer studies (British Council, 2013). It can also bring a global perspective to the teaching and research of an institution, as an influx of international students can diversify the composition of the student body. While Chinese universities hope eventually to begin to reverse the process of internationalisation by exporting their own programs, at present most study programs involve collaborations with Western institutions (known as Joint Venture Universities) and take place within China.

Joint Venture institutions generally use English as a Medium for Instruction (EMI). Although the ubiquity of EMI has come in for criticism from a number of quarters (see Phillipson, 2009), it is undeniable that English is the language of academia in the modern world. Most journals are published in English and English is the Lingua Franca at the majority of academic conferences. Proficiency in English is therefore a key tool for students to progress within their disciplines. Learners are supported in this through EAP classes. EAP is also provided in order to support learners, particularly in their early years of study. While it may come as little surprise that English teaching in China is being conducted on a large scale, a hitherto unforeseen dimension is the fact that an increasing number of these students are not, in fact, Chinese. These international students are likely to have different learning experiences and language requirements to the average local student.

Previous research into the international student experience

Three key areas of focus when it comes to the international student experience are as follows:

What motivates international students?

What difficulties do international students have in adjusting?

How well can international students develop intercultural competence?

Many international students are motivated by the chance to spend time abroad, learn the local language and experience another culture. These possibilities 'pull' the student to another country. Other factors may 'push' a student away from their home environment, such as social/political/economic issues or a lack of work or study opportunities (Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012). Modern communications and increased availability of air travel means that for many students the idea of spending a significant period of time in another country is less daunting than it may have been in the past. It may therefore follow that the fear factor of study abroad is slowly being replaced by an awareness that success in this kind of challenging environment can lead to self-improvement, such as increased maturity and self-confidence (Kelly, 2010; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Should this lead to greater employability, both the student and the institution can consider the experience successful.

This is not to say, however, that the international student experience is without its challenges. Moving abroad to study can be a great upheaval in students' lives, particularly if it involves moving far from home. Students may feel lonely and isolated (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Ramsay, Jones, & Baker, 2007), and it is common for them to form their own social groups, often by default retreating into mono-ethnic communication with students from their home country. Such groups provide support mechanisms and can be useful communities of practice (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), but can also create an impression of unwillingness to get involved in the new culture. A goal for international universities is the creation of a multi-ethnic diverse student body, within which there is true inter-cultural exchange and an environment to which international students can quickly adjust.

Well-adjusted international students could be said to be interculturally competent. Intercultural competence (ICC), defined by Deardorff (2011, p. 66) as 'effective and appropriate behaviour in intercultural situations', incorporates recognition of cultural differences, willingness to engage with other cultures and self-awareness (Sercu, 2005). Language difficulties can hinder the development of ICC as students find it more difficult to mix. For international students in China, there must be serious questions as to whether an English-speaking environment in an international university setting provides suitable opportunities to acquire intercultural skills. Again, there may be a tendency to revert to fragmented social peer groups.

Group work is one technique which teachers can use in (and out of) class in order to promote ICC. Group work necessitates knowledge sharing, increases confidence, allows interaction and is also a skill that is highly valued in the modern workplace (Sercu 2005; Edmead, 2013). The nature of EAP classes allows perhaps more opportunities for real ICC due to the communicative teaching methods common in the TESOL world over the last few decades.

International students at XJTLU

A forthcoming article (Lee, 2015) details research into the experiences of international students studying EAP in China. 21 international students across all year groups at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) were interviewed in focus groups. The study found that group work is a popular way of learning for international students and provides them with chances to interact with local students which are not available elsewhere in the university. These interactions often then extend beyond the classroom. One key finding is that it is often important for the teacher to play an active role in allocating students to groups rather than allowing self-selection. Some difficulties with group work are also noted – communication problems, free-riding (non-participation) and the use of Chinese in group discussions have all been raised as issues. Another interesting finding is that international students seem to adopt a pivotal role within the class, and that this can happen voluntarily or otherwise. Some students thrive as the centre of attention, while others may not appreciate the extra pressure.

The study also looked at how international students felt about the teaching methods employed in their EAP classes and found that they are satisfied on the whole with the EAP help they receive. Nevertheless, a number of the international students expressed a desire for

improved feedback on their classwork. While this is unlikely to be an issue limited to international students, it may be that their expectations are different and teachers need to be aware of this. These students may also have their own particular language difficulties which require closer inspection.

The topic of motivation featured heavily in focus group discussions conducted as part of the research for the above study. While student attendance in class can vary for a variety of reasons, there seems to be some evidence to suggest that a number of international students at XJTLU believe that their English ability is at an already-sufficient level, and that, as a result, attending two years of EAP classes is unnecessary. If international students are given tasks which mean little to them, it can reduce their willingness to engage interculturally and affect attendance levels (Montgomery, 2009). Nevertheless, it is clear that the Language Centre has taken positive steps to address this issue through training sessions for teachers on interculturality and the creation of extra optional modules designed specifically for higher-level language students. Clear communication of EAP course objectives and the introduction of teaching strategies which embrace multiculturality may also prove to be successful strategies as international student numbers and diversity increase.

Looking forward

International students can play an important role in enabling Chinese universities to become bona-fide international institutions. For this to happen, the universities need to host a diverse student population with various hopes and needs. The institutions can manage and meet international student expectations by facilitating greater intercultural understanding through increased communicative competence, which can happen through the provision of cross-cultural communication opportunities. As EAP teachers at these universities, we have a responsibility to encourage this kind of collaboration in our classes. If we can generate cultural exchange through the medium of English during class, this may provide a platform for increased interaction outside class time. Then, hopefully, we will see truly interculturally competent populations within truly international institutions.

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