The Engagement Pattern and Challenges of International Students in a Thai Higher Educational Context

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the international student engagement pattern and challenges for international students on general education courses at Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus, where the majority of students are Thai. The data were collected with reflective questionnaires, camp diaries and in-depth interviews with international students enrolling for two courses in Semester 2, Academic Year 2019, namely 905-101 New Consciousness and 905-102 Happy and Peaceful Life. The study revealed their engagement pattern in seven aspects; 1) emotional engagement 2. physical engagement 3) behavioral engagement 4) social engagement 5) cultural engagement 6) cognitive engagement and 7) meta-cognitive engagement. In terms of challenges, they identified language difficulties even though this was not an obstacle when mixing with Thai students or participating in course activities.

Keywords: sociocultural adjustment, engagement strategies, international student engagement, active learning

INTRODUCTION

Engaging international students is an important indicator of successful adjustment into their new socio-cultural environment. Previous studies found that international students were challenged by academic, social and emotional reactions to their new life (Gebhard, 2012). According to Berry's acculturation strategies (2005), students can either manage their problems by adjusting themselves to the majority of the host society and culture, for example, coping strategies, or by displaying behaviors that can obstruct them from adapting, such as complaining and disconnecting with the host country. Student adjustment also depends on the management of the host society, for instance, giving importance to the policy of enhancing multiculturalism in the host society. Consequently, educational institutions should play an important role in supporting the adjustment of international students. This could be achieved through such teaching and learning in the classroom. Student engagement strategies are also a way to encourage international student adjustment in their foreign academic environment. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the international student engagement pattern as well as their challenges to

become part of the Thai educational context, so that educational institutions as well as involved parties can develop a more appropriate approach to support the socio-cultural adjustment of international students in Thai education.

Research Objectives

This research aims to;

1. explore the international student engagement pattern on general education courses

2. explore the challenges for international students when engaging in general education courses

Research Methodology

Participants and data collection

The research was based on a constructivism paradigm using qualitative research methodology. The patterns of engagement strategies as well as the challenges to become part of the Thai educational context were explored through (1) camp evaluation surveys (2) student reflections in diaries (3) semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The study focused on five international students among 203 Thai students, enrolling in two general education courses (New Consciousness and Happy and Peaceful Life) in Semester 2, academic year 2019. Three were Chinese males, one was a Chinese female and the other was a Kazakh female. They were all studying at the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism. The research focused on all international students because the teaching methodology of both courses was based on camp activities and active learning, which allow international students to have more opportunities to be with Thai students through several types of activity, for example, group reflection and problem-solving activities.

Analysis of data

The researchers aim to discover the patterns of engagement and challenges to become part of the Thai educational context for international students; therefore, qualitative analysis was employed. The data were collected and analyzed using pattern matching techniques.

Results

1. Engagement pattern

From the overall reflections of the courses via the camp evaluation survey, reflective diaries and semi-structured in-depth interviews, the international students showed their engagement as follows.

1.1 Emotional engagement

From the camp evaluation, the international students were satisfied with the camp. They reflected that they liked the following activities; a movie date, character cards, art as meditation, silent communication, mindful exercise (Tao Te), a problem is not a problem, as well as other camp activities such as discussions and games. They also liked the room arrangement (e.g. empty room, sitting on the floor, with students and teachers sitting in a circle), as well as physical movement activities. In addition, they enjoyed joining activities with students from different cultures and communicating in a foreign language and sharing in pairs, brainstorming, having discussions and doing presentations in small groups. A student said *"I can't even describe my feelings while I was watching that movie. It was so emotional. It felt like I understood and went through their life."*. Even though some international students were not confident to speak out, they also felt that their opinions and cooperation were important. A student reflected on the Chinese philosophical exercise *Tao Te: ' At the beginning it was very boring because I didn't get why we were doing it. However, later when we moved on from dancing to do some slow moves (which was like mediation)", I felt very relaxed.".*

1.2 Physical engagement

It was found that such physical movement activities as games, the Tao Te exercise and art activities, could engage international students. The samples of their reflection are as follows: *"The dance encouraged us to keep silent and follow the feeling."*; *"The game which the teacher organized for the students in the movie was the best idea. She put a line in the middle of the class.... Our lecturer did the same game after we watched that movie. At the beginning there were easy questions, but they also asked if we felt heart-broken or as though we had lost someone, which we loved.";* and *"The movement where we moved our hands from the top of our head to the stomach made me forget that I was tired and I was ready for a new day.".*

Art as Meditation also engaged the international students in different ways as they reflected that; *"Paper-cutting activities are very simple, but we seldom calm down to concentrate on a simple thing. This activity let us find the fun of concentration again, a seemingly complex pattern, concentrate to do can also be completed quickly.". "And my favorite activity is recover dance. At first I think it was very simple but I was wrong. The action needs very slowly to ordeal you patient. It can exercise your character. In this activity, I learn so much.; and "Dance activity is a combination of movement and non-movement, teaching us not only meditation, but also the release of nature. Do the same in life. Do the right thing at the right time, work and rest combine to make life happy."*.

1.3 Behavioral engagement

In the camp evaluation survey, foreign students shared their opinions about the group activities throughout the camp. They were on time because of the camp agreement. They were also attentive in the activities and did not leave the activity room during class or camp activities. This was also stated in their diary reflections as one student wrote; *"Today is the second day in the camp. I became exhausted from yesterday's activities but I can't wait to see what we will do today. I did not want to get up from my bed but finally I got to the camp on time.".*

1.4 Social engagement

They reflected that they could practice communication and give their opinions. Sharing opinions and experience in pairs, brainstorming, discussion and presentation in a small group also socially engaged the international students. Such social activity encouraged them to overcome social barriers. One of them reflected *that there was "no need to fear, just to be honest and act with integrity. It let us become good listeners and to concentrate, feel his emotion and empathize with him.".* Also, the camp activities were pleasing for the students as they could "*make more friends from these activities and meet many interesting people.".* Such activities made them feel well-adjusted and able to connect with one another as one said *"In this activity, I made so many friends. In the games, we helped each other, to consider everything, assist in games, and open our minds to analyze everything. We were like a family.".*

1.5 Cultural engagement

The international students stated that they liked joining activities with students from different cultures and communicating in a foreign language. In regard to cultural engagement, one student said *"What I liked in the deep listening activity was that I learned to listen to someone and be listened to without interruption, which is different to my culture. Of course, it was strange telling my stories to new people because I had the feeling that they did not really care about that and I had questions in my mind like "why do I have to share my stories with strangers?". Therefore, it was a new experience for me."* This student also added in the interview that they felt relieved after sharing their feelings with a stranger from a different culture.

1.6 Cognitive engagement

The activity in which the international students best showed their cognitive engagement was "A problem is not a problem" in which the students discussed the issues regarding their problem and engaged in creative problem-solving. "On a Movie Date" was another activity in which the students showed their analytical thinking. A student said that *"In the afternoon activity, everyone sat together to summarize the morning movie. For me, what*

impressed me most in the film was Erin's persistence and perseverance with her students. No matter how rebellious the students were, she always treated them kindly. An excellent teacher is indeed a beacon in student growth, guiding students to follow the right path."

1.7 Meta-cognitive engagement

Based on their reflections in the camp evaluation survey, they could concentrate well in activities. They also reflected that they could practice being with presence, living with and understanding themselves, meditation, deep listening and understanding others. Feeling empathy with others was also evident as one student said that *"I also can empathize with their feelings."*.

The international students also displayed their meta-cognitive engagement by reflecting on their favorite activities as follows;

A student reflected about the mindful exercise "Tao Te" saying that *"In the morning activity, we learned a set of Tao Te Ching gymnastics. Although I didn't know much about it when I was in China, I could still feel a trace of Taoism's attitude towards life. The relationship between man and nature should be integrated."*. A student said *"I loved it because you could be yourself and gain experience doing meditation."*.

Self-awareness was also mentioned in regard to the "On a movie date" activity. A student said that *"The movie also reflected so much of a person's character. We could learn so much and reflect on ourselves" and "The activities in the evening allowed us to understand ourselves better."* One of the international students also relate the character with herself as *"Some aspects of the character's life and feelings were similar to mine. It taught me to be stronger."*.

Meta-cognitive engagement was also reflected through the 'Art as meditation' activities, such as *"in the recover dance I learn patience. and in daily life I can do things with more patience and be successful"*. A student said that the 'cutting papers' activity was like life in general*: "focusing on one thing is much more efficient than trying to accomplish more than one thing."*. Regarding the splatter painting activity, a student said that *"Simple painting can relieve stress and make you feel alive. People should not suppress their feelings as it will only lead to more trouble, so an appropriate release can effectively improve the happiness of life and make us feel more relaxed."*.

The international students also engaged well in "silent communication" and many activities which used "deep listening. A student stated that *"I learned to be more patient and listen to the others.";* and *"I normally like to ask questions during conversations because I have so many questions and I can't wait to ask them. But this activity taught me to be patient. I felt uncomfortable there as well because it was outside my comfort zone. But after that, I felt proud of myself because I joined in all of the activities and was active*

and did not just sit it out because I didn't like something.". Such meta-cognitive engagement occurred *"when I saw that I was not the only person to have problems in life, I felt a little bit better. As a person who closes herself off from everyone to look strong, I felt like I had released some of my pain, which made me a little bit happier.".*

Finally, meditation, which was practiced in many activities, also engaged the students. One student stated that it was *"good way for me when I experience work stress"*; and a *"good way to help me relax"*.

2 International student challenges when engaging in courses

Language and communication seemed to be the most challenging aspect for international students to mix with Thai students, especially in small group activities since Thai students usually spoke in Thai together. They said that it was very difficult for them to communicate with Thai students who could not speak English and they felt uncomfortable when some activities were conducted in Thai rather than English. Furthermore, when they wanted to express their ideas, they sometimes found that they could not express them fully in English. However, they did not see language and communication as an obstacle to participation in the activities or to understand the course content. A student noted that *"It was very difficult to communicate with Thai students who don't speak English and I felt uncomfortable when Thai was used in some activities rather than English. For example, sometimes I didn't understand when they asked a question or understand why they were laughing because the lecturer translated it later." "Another activity which I liked was deep listening. It was quite funny for me because of language problems when I tried to tell them something and when they tried to tell me something. But we used body language and our new friends helped us too."*

Conclusion and Discussion

The international students showed different patterns of engagement in the New Consciousness and Happy and Peaceful Life general education courses. Meta-cognitive engagement was the most distinguishing form of engagement. Students with higher metacognition are more successful as learners because they are able to monitor and direct their own learning processes. They have the ability to master and apply the learning strategies to solve problems more easily.

The study also found that international students were able to achieve the course learning outcomes even though they experienced language and cultural difficulties when studying with a large number of Thai students. This indicated that organizing teaching and learning activities using a meta-cognitive engagement strategy will help reduce the language and cultural differences gaps in an intercultural classroom environment. This conclusion is in line with the concept of active learning and education in the 21st century with the idea

that learning must begin with practice before understanding the theory (Vicharn Panich, 2012).

The conclusions indicate that Thai higher education should promote meta-cognitive engagement for both Thai and international students because this engagement strategy helps students to adjust in intercultural classes, reducing stress and the drop-out rate. This is in accordance with the findings of Dechakup (2001), who stated that the ability to control and assess one's thinking helps an individual to master his or her cognitive processes, which will affect student adjustment and academic ability. However, further study on the relationship between meta-cognitive engagement and adjustment for international students in Thai higher education should be considered.

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