

CULTURAL AWARENESS AND BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO TESTING THEORIES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION

EVELYNE GLASER¹

Összefoglalás:

A tanulmányban kritikai megközelítésben vizsgálom a hallgatói csereprogramokat és elemzem a hallgatóknak a fogadó ország kultúrájához való pszichológiai és szociokulturális alkalmazkodó képességéről alkotott modelleket. Bemutatom az ehhez szükséges kulturális és viselkedési normákat, és bemutatom a hagyományos csereprogramok korlátait.

Ezt követően betekintést nyújtok az úgynevezett ACT/MGB programról szóló hosszú távú tanulmány eredményeibe, amelynek keretében három vagy több országból érkezett hallgatók tanulnak együtt. Ez a speciális képzési forma megfelel az Európai Bizottságnak a csereprogramokra vonatkozó kulturális, (inter)perszonális és nyelvtanulási céljainak a csereprogramok során.

Kulcsszavak:

Interkulturális alkalmazkodás, interkulturális tanulás, hallgatói csereprogramok

Summary:

This article starts with a critical reflection on student exchange programmes and discusses different models of students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment in the host culture. It outlines the different needs they may have to adapt to cultural and behavioural norms and points out the limitations of traditional exchange programmes.

In a further step, the article provides insights from a long-term study on a special format of student exchange, the ACT/MGB programme, which brings together students from three (or more) different continents. This format comes close to meeting the European Commission's objectives concerning cultural, (inter)personal and language learning during exchange programmes.

Keywords:

intercultural adjustment, intercultural learning, student exchange programmes

¹ Director, Zentrum für Fachsprachen und Inrekulturell Kommunikation, Johannes Kepler University, Linz, evelyne.glaser@jku.at

The ERASMUS programme was established in 1987. It has thus been 25 years since the first exchange students were offered the opportunity to study abroad for a semester or a year. Currently, every year, 200,000 students take part in this programme. In total, 2.2 million students have benefited from it and the EU keeps investing 450 mio euros a year to make it work. (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80_en.htm) Much research has been conducted on the effectiveness of the programme to check whether the purpose given to it by the European Commission really applies:

„Many studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students' lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. Their experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen. In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases the students' employability and job prospects.”
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80_en.htm (accessed 6 August 2012)

In the meantime, many countries that are not part of the EU have adopted the idea of encouraging the exchange of students. Thus, the academic environment in higher education has undergone major changes due to the fact that our student bodies have become much more diverse and multicultural. However, with the increase of students from other countries in our classrooms, we have noticed that the interest of our national students to interact with the exchange students has declined over the years. While curiosity was high in the beginning to get to know the foreign students, we notice nowadays that very few close contacts are established between local and international students. On the other hand, we can observe that the exchange students form relatively close multicultural in-groups that tend to work, go out, and travel together. Therefore, the question arises whether these students are actually able to get to know the host culture more intensely than they would as tourists coming to that country. Do they actually enhance their awareness and learning about the host country and are they able to manage their sociocultural integration in the host country?

Through his seminal work on the acculturation of immigrants, Berry (1980, 1997) has motivated a number of researchers to investigate the acculturation strategies of international students in different types of study abroad programmes. Bourhis et al. (1997) adapted Berry's model and came up with the following framework describing the different types of adjustment in the host culture:

- Integration: the wish to maintain both the heritage culture and to adopt the host culture,
- Assimilation: the wish to adopt the host culture but not to maintain the heritage culture,
- Separation: the wish to maintain the heritage culture without adopting the host culture,
- Marginalization: the refusal of both heritage culture maintenance and host culture adoption (which results in the loss of one's heritage culture as well as that of the host culture. (Berry 1980)

Bouhis et al. (1997) replaced the dimension of marginalization in their Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) by the dimensions exclusion and individualism. Exclusionists deny immigrants the right to maintain their heritage culture and do not believe that they can become full members of the host society (p.381), while individualists attach less importance to home or host culture during the acculturation process. Instead, they believe that individual characteristics are the major determinants (p. 381).

In the context of short-term international exchange programmes, it is probably more appropriate to look at intercultural adjustment rather than acculturation. According to Berry (2005), „intercultural adjustment refers to relatively stable changes which occur in an individual or group in response to external demands“ (as cited in Matera et al., 2012, 461). It

manifests itself along the *psychological* and the *intercultural* dimension. *Psychological* adjustment pertains to the individual's psychological and physical wellbeing. It is characterised by few psychological problems, high self-esteem and overall life satisfaction. Sociocultural adjustment looks at how well an individual is able to manage daily life in the new cultural context; it is characterized by good school adjustment and few behavioural problems (Berry, 2005).

The extent to which *intercultural* adjustment takes place is closely linked to the individual's sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 1994). „Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave.” (Bandura, 1994, 71)

The degree of students' intercultural adjustment in the host country is also highly dependent upon the social ties they manage to establish. The relationships with other students from countries other than their own or the host society has been a neglected topic in the acculturation literature which tends to concentrate more on effects of co-national and host cultural contacts (e.g., Berry & Kim, 1988; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). However, Bochner and his colleagues (Furnham & Bochner, 1986) did substantial research on international students in the 1970s and 1980s and developed a functional model of international students' friendship patterns in which they identified three distinct types of social ties established and maintained by international students:

- (1) the mono-cultural network which consists of close friendships with other co-nationals. This tends to be the international students' primary social network;
- (2) the bicultural network comprised of locals including academics, students, and advisors, which tends to be their secondary network; and
- (3) the multicultural network involving internationals from other countries, which tends to be the third network. (Kashima & Loh, 2006, 472)

Bochner (1982) pointed out that these three types of social ties serve different functions for international students. Within the monocultural network, students can express their values and engage in activities that are characteristic of their culture of origin. The bicultural network helps students achieve their professional/academic goals, and the multicultural network is used for social and recreational purposes. Within this network, students organise parties or trips to different locations in or around the host country.

Research has shown that the contact with co-nationals and with locals will foster psychological adjustment, or emotional wellbeing when moving from one culture to another (for a review see Ward, 2001; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). In contrast, sociocultural adjustment, or adapting to and coping with the new cultural environment, is facilitated through social contacts with locals rather than with co-nationals (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1993; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999).

It can therefore be concluded that psychological adjustment depends largely on the amount of stressors and coping resources, whereas sociocultural adjustment relates more to social and cultural learning that is enhanced through contacts with members of the host country (Bochner, 1986). The ties with international students are more conducive to psychological adjustment but can also be helpful for sociocultural adjustment if the international students are long-term residents in the host culture.

One could assume that the students' culture of origin, also referred to as heritage culture, does not change when they enter a host culture. In many cases, however, awareness about this culture often becomes only salient once they leave their customary environment (Sussman, 2000). As research (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1993) has shown, more intense co-national relationships rather than ties with locals during a stay abroad will enhance heritage culture because they allow students to recognise their similarities to

their compatriots. These results are in agreement with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and with the similarity-attraction model (Davison & Jones, 1976). On the other hand, Kasjima & Loh (2012, 480) have found that intensive contacts with international students will also foster the students' consciousness of their heritage culture because the cultural differences become more apparent.

Upon entering a new culture, students have to face a fair amount of uncertainty and ambiguity. The extent to which they can cope with this depends largely on their personality. Kruglanski and Webster (1996) explain this difference in the ability to cope with different levels of the *need for cognitive closure* (NCC). This can be defined as a "desire for predictability, preference for order and structure, discomfort with ambiguity, decisiveness, and close-mindedness" (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994, 1049). Individuals with high NCC are likely to experience poor psychological adjustment when arriving in a new culture. However, if supported by a local reference group that is familiar with local customs and culture, high NCC (vs. low NCC) individuals tend to be keen to adopt the local values and perspectives and quickly adjust to the host society. "In contrast, if high NCC individuals encounter a conational reference group who shares heritage worldviews with the newcomers and assists them in maintaining their heritage customs, they tend to embrace their heritage worldviews and freeze with them (Kasjima & Loh, 472). Kasjima & Loh (2006) have shown that high NCC students, in particular those with more local or international ties, experience better sociocultural adjustment, whereas those with more co-national ties show poorer sociocultural adjustment. Also, the more local ties high NCC students have the better their psychological adjustment (Kasjima & Loh, 2006, 482).

Individuals with low NCC are not greatly influenced by the reference group they meet in the host culture. In general, their ability to speak the local language will enhance psychological as well as sociocultural adjustment (Kasjima & Loh, 2006, 479).

The study conducted by Kasjima and Loh (2006) showed very clearly that international students with more local relationships were psychologically better adjusted and had greater knowledge of the host culture. Thus, personal contacts with local residents seem important for international students. An earlier study by Ward and Kennedy (1993) found that sociocultural adjustment was better among exchange students with more local ties.

In agreement with the studies discussed above, international exchange programmes can become effective if the amount of ties with local as well as international students can be brought to a maximum. From the behaviour of typical ERASMUS students abroad it has become apparent that they intensely seek to establish links with international students, while they typically find it much harder to build close relationships with local students. This is easy to understand, as it requires a much greater effort to gain access to an existing in-group. The group of international students, on the other hand, is comprised of a large number of individuals all searching for contacts. Hence, the opportunity to create ties with either international students or co-nationals is much greater. This, in turn, will enhance psychological adjustment but will contribute only to a lesser extent to sociocultural adjustment and learning about the host culture.

The 'ACT-Master of Global Business Programme' – a different approach to student exchange

Seeing the apparent weaknesses of the traditional exchange programmes, the Johannes Kepler University Linz joined forces, seven years ago, with two partner universities, i.e. the University of Victoria in Canada and the National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan, to launch a programme at Master's level which was to ensure that cultural (including sociocultural) learning would effectively take place for the participating students (and even

faculty). The Master of Global Business programme takes students through three progressive international business modules that correspond to their regional contexts. In the final component, they apply what they have learned through a global business project. (<http://www.uvic.ca/gustavson/gill/mgb/structure/index.php>) This programme lasts for eight months and was created to enhance the students' global mindset and expose them to as much cultural learning as possible. Through this programme, students should be enabled to assume positions in global companies that require a greater level of cultural competence than could normally be expected from university graduates.

As can be seen from Fig.1, the programme starts in Canada where the selected students from the three universities meet for the first time. For roughly three months, they go through a programme that provides them with the core concepts of international management and of doing business in North America. They then move on to Taiwan for another three months where they are introduced to the principles of entrepreneurship and find out about doing business in China and Taiwan. During this period of time, they work on team projects trying to put their learning into practice. The final portion of the programme (roughly two and a half months) takes place in Austria. Here, aside from learning about doing business in Europe, the students work in multicultural teams on a real-life project with a local company for about two months getting highly involved with the project topic and with their mentors at the respective company. Throughout the programme, they also have language classes either in Chinese, English or German, depending on their native language. One course that spreads across all three countries deals with Global Leadership and Cultural Intelligence. In this course taught by faculty members of two of the universities, students are guided in their learning process on cultural differences.

Even though the period spent in each country is relatively short and probably not long enough to ensure real cultural adjustment, the students are able to speed up the cultural learning process as a result of close interaction with locals and other international students. Also, as Lumkes et al. (2012) have shown, "significant personal development can be achieved even on very short study abroad experiences" (151).

During the entire programme, the students work, live, and travel together. Their interpersonal contact is very intense. In every location, there is one peer group of local students that helps the others adjust to the culture as quickly as possible and enables them to cope with everyday and academic life in the respective location. These students are the reference group that is ready to answer all questions pertaining to the local culture.

Towards the end of the programme, pressure tends to get quite intense, as the teams are getting ready to present their project findings to the companies. This close-to-professional-life experience during the project phase shows the students how valuable but also challenging it is to work with people from other cultures. Even though they all know each other quite well, they still have to cope with differences in culture, personality and motivation. However, having gone through intense learning processes regarding culture and culture-specific behavioural norms, they manage quite well in most cases to cope with this stressful situation. As students are assigned to their teams and can therefore not choose freely with whom they would like to work, being able to resolve conflicts is one of the skills they need to develop in this programme. This is rare in traditional exchange programmes, as exchange students typically have an opportunity to avoid contacts with people they do not get along with.

Throughout the ACT/MGB programme, the students have to write reflective essays on their cultural learning and group processes. In every location, the students meet face-to-face with the process coordinator on an individual basis to discuss their personal development in the group as well as their cultural learning experience. It is from these encounters, from the reflective essays, and from personal observation that the following findings have been drawn and will later be measured against the parameters of successful exchange programmes

established by the European Commission. Due to space constraints, only a limited number of sample quotes can be provided:

1. The set-up of the programme fosters psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

“I had the feeling that our Taiwanese friends were very shy and closed when we met in Victoria. When I tried to start a conversation with one of our Taiwanese colleagues, I always had to take the first step and lead the conversation. Also when we worked together in a group they rarely came up with ideas spontaneously, although they had really good ideas when you asked them.

It might be because they are now at home and are our hosts that all of them seem to be totally different. They take on responsibility, organise all activities, talk to all classmates, come up with jokes and are really communicative and hang out with us. They just seem to be much more self-confident than before. I talked already to some of the Taiwanese classmates that I really like the fact that they are much more open and talkative than before and they just argued that they just enjoy to be at home and can show us as much as possible in their home country. They really try hard to be the best hosts for us and make us feel comfortable all the time.”

2. The students engage actively in cultural learning and are motivated to do so in order to cope with their assigned tasks (i.e. teamwork, group projects).

“I think Westerners always distinguish very clear between studying and leisure including going to gym and watching a movie. Specially, they do not like sacrificing their leisure time to work. During the meeting with my group members and by hearing other groups’ stories, it is so normal to hear western students explain the reason why they cannot attend the meeting or will hold the meeting at certain time, as they have to go to gym or they have to have some leisure activities with someone. However, I think it will never been found as an excuse among Asian students; instead, what they always do is cancel the leisure activities and put the work in the first place.”

3. By comparing different cultural behaviours and norms, students raise their critical cultural awareness.

“A: Well, I never really knew anything about China and the countries around. Like, it’s a completely different culture. It’s just the way they do things, like for instance, when we were in Victoria, if anyone had any complaints or anything, or the teacher wasn’t doing something right, you know, anyone would speak up whether they were Chinese or Taiwanese, Canadian or Austrian. Here you see, that’s kind of funny, you see the Chinese and the Taiwanese people are more silent. Sometimes you hear some of the Canadians or Austrians complain about something and you just have the Chinese, you know, they seem embarrassed and they don’t say anything. That was interesting, it’s like they kind of changed their... behaviour.”

4. By dealing with different personalities they enhance self-reliance and self-awareness.

“After a few months, I do see cultural differences. For instance, the Canadians usually take the center stage; they like to take control in the projects and be in charge. The Asians in general are more conformist, they will accept what is going on, don’t question as much and will deliver what is expected. The Austrians, at least the guys, are extremely competitive. No matter whether we are talking about school, sports, risk (board game), or anything they try.”

5. By interacting with the group and in the local environment they improve their language skills.

“My languages have improved, but I would say first of all my English. This is due to the fact that I lived with a native in the same room, so I was exposed to English all the time. Especially here in Canada I feel very comfortable with my English ability, and also raising questions or comments in the classroom isn’t a problem. Regarding my Mandarin, I think that I still have to try harder.”

6. By comparing cultural differences they get a stronger sense of what it means to be a European/Canadian/Taiwanese/Chinese/etc. citizen.

T: I guess Canada was much more easier on me, but still I am an Asian. But I, I don't say that Taiwan was that much easy for me at the beginning 'cause if you take from the food culture to the language culture, like even it's, be, belongs from Asia I thought that it's gonna be easy for me. I'm from here, I'm also from Asia.

E: Yes.

T: But they have so different culture. But I was more comfortable when I was in Canada, 'cause I guess they have a more diverse culture in Canada."

From the findings drawn from this long-term study it becomes evident that for students to truly benefit from an enhanced experience during their stay abroad, it is necessary to provide an environment that encourages reflection and active guidance in their cultural learning process. Consequently, the programme described above clearly meets the expectations outlined by the European Commission:

1. "a period spent abroad ... enriches students' lives in the academic and professional fields"

In the ACT/MGB programme, students travel to two completely different parts of the world, a fact they find extremely enriching. In these countries, they become familiar with teaching styles typical of the local culture and they experience different academic environments.

2. "a period spent abroad ... can also improve language learning"

In the MGB programme, students make use of a working and a socializing language (English), which, for many of them, is a foreign language. In addition, they have to acquire another foreign language (Chinese or German). They can practice this language not only in the classroom, but also in everyday life.

3. "a period spent abroad ... can also improve intercultural skills"

The MGB programme focuses on the enhancement of intercultural skills and the development of a global mindset. The students engage actively in intercultural learning and are continuously reminded to do so in the daily interactions with their peers as well as through the teaching programme (course on *Global Leadership and Cultural Intelligence*; teamwork; group project) and through the reflective journals they are required to write. They need to be culturally mindful to be able to interact and to cope with their academic and interpersonal tasks successfully.

4. "a period spent abroad ... can also improve self-reliance and self-awareness"

Throughout the ACT/MGB programme students are continuously encouraged to compare different cultural behaviours, values, and norms. Thus, they raise their own critical cultural awareness. When interacting with different personalities that become manifest for instance in teamwork but also in leisure activities, they enhance self-reliance and self-awareness.

5. "Their experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen."

By comparing cultural differences and reflecting intensely on their home culture, students in the ACT/MGB programme get a very strong sense not only of what it means to be a European citizen, but also a Canadian, Taiwanese, Chinese, Chilean, Russian, etc. citizen.

6. "In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases the students' employability and job prospects."

The graduates from this programme have succeeded in finding jobs that take them to all parts of the world. They also tend to be more open to seek such employments and therefore, become attractive for global companies.

In conclusion, it can be said that this programme manages to foster the psychological and sociocultural adjustment of the participating students in a considerable better way than traditional exchange programmes do, and it enables them to transfer their experiences and skills successfully to their professional careers.

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