Cross-Cultural Adjustment of Lao and Vietnamese International Graduate Students: Implication to Adult Education

Buasawan Simmala

Abstract: Cross-cultural adjustment of Lao and Vietnamese international graduate students in the U.S. is a dynamic process. For these students, academic failure means significantly more than just the loss of money and time; hence, they believe that they must make appropriate socio-cultural adjustments at all costs. Five major themes emerged from the data collected from thirteen Lao and Vietnamese graduate students interviewed: motivation to come study in the U.S., adjustment difficulties, coping strategies, desired characteristics of learning environment and support programs, and adjustment outcomes. The differences in the Collectivist and Individualistic core values, which shape Asian and American educational systems contrastingly, are the major causes of their adjustment difficulties. To overcome these difficulties they students employed certain stress coping strategies. This research’s results have implications on both international higher education and adult education as they can be used to design instruction and the support programs that aim to make the learning experience more meaningful to these students.

Introduction

Furthering education in America, especially at the graduate level, can be a means for success in social mobility for many students, especially for those who come from developing countries such as Laos and Vietnam. However, their educational achievements depend on their social, cultural, linguistic adjustment competence vs. mainly to scholastic ability. Cross-cultural adjustment difficulties facing international students from non-English speaking countries are multi-dimensional (Erichsen, 2009). Factors such as cultural discrepancies, family background, geographical distance, social interactions (Lee & Rice, 2007), language ability, discrimination and ignorance, and legal regulations (Fatima, 2001), can form barriers to their academic performance and social adjustment. The support from the institutions is important, and since Asian cultures place high importance on academic achievement, for Lao and Vietnamese students in particular, academic failure means more than just the loss of money and/or time.

American universities are enjoying the rapidly growing number of Lao and Vietnamese students who previously preferred to study in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. According to Opendoors (2009), with the total number of almost 13,000 students in the 2008-09 academic year, Vietnam jumped from the 20th place in the 2006-07 academic year to the 9th in the list of top countries sending students to the U.S. Their enrollment in the U.S. universities is beneficial to the universities and to the country in many ways (Altback, 1991). Therefore, this qualitative research sought to explore their cross-cultural adjustment process and patterns. Five major themes emerged from the data gathered through the interviews of thirteen Lao and Vietnamese graduate students. These include motivation to study in the U.S., adjustment difficulties, coping strategies, desired characteristics of the learning environment and support
programs, and adjustment outcomes. Understanding the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of these students is vital for American educators and higher education administrators. Their desired learning environment and the level of dedication by faculty as well as support programs that emerged from the body of this new knowledge could be beneficial for educators when developing curricula and designing instruction that aim to make the learning experience more meaningful. By doing so, it would demonstrate that American universities are committed to providing all students with an adult friendly learning environment and relevant education.

Theoretical Framework

Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) consider “the cross-cultural contact as a major stressful life event” (p. 7), and refer to the cross-cultural adjustment process as a kind of transitional process that is involved with affective, cognitive and behavioral responses. These are important for psychological and sociocultural outcomes. Since cross-cultural adjustment process of sojourning individuals, such as the Lao and Vietnamese international students, can be so dynamic, I collected and analyzed my data within the following three theoretical frameworks:

Hofstede and Bon’s (1996) Individualism–Collectivism model. I found that their first three out of five dimensions of national culture that include power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism are relevant to explaining the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of the Lao and Vietnamese students who were accustomed to learning in institutions shaped by cultural values are starkly different from that of the American institutions. Furthermore, the cultural model of self in Triandis (1989) and Markus and Kitayama (1991) is useful in explaining the difficulties in the social and psychological adjustment process.

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) stress and coping. This framework explains that how an individual decides to cope with problems depends on her/his appraisal of the stressfulness of the situation. She/he does so through considering “both contextual and personal characteristics” (Aldwin, 2008, p. 564,) involved with that situation. Aldwin (2008) amplifies this model arguing that culture also plays an important role in stress and coping strategies as it affects this process in four ways: (1) It guides an individual to identify what type of stressors exist in the society that individual may encounter; (2) how individuals in a given society appraise the condition causing stressfulness; (3) what types of “coping strategies [one can use to cope with the stress] in a given situation” (p. 565); and (4) through institutions in a particular cultural setting, it informs its members about what coping strategies may be available for them.

Kim’s (2001), integrative model of cross-cultural adaptation. This model explains that when "an individual is in contact with his/her new cultural environment, s/he often goes through a spiral-like process-stress, adapt and growth” (Kim 2001, p. 339). In this cross-cultural adaption perspective, culture shock is viewed as a pre-condition for growth.

Research Method

An interpretive qualitative method was used to describe the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of thirteen students studying at six universities across the United States. This method included a semi-structured interview approach. Following Merriam (2002), I used purposeful
sample and snow-ball sampling strategy, which helped me to locate five female and seven male students with ages ranging from 25 to 35 who have not received a Bachelors’ degree in an English speaking country. As suggested by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995), I kept field notes for each interview and immediately transcribed it to make a tentative data analysis using “constant comparison” method, which includes three steps as follows:

1. Coding: the main-point approach as recommended by (Glaser and Strauss, 1967);
2. Sorting: an analysis program called N* VIVO; and
3. Visual display: Inspiration software was used to draw “a diagram of [a concept map] on [a] paper with lines linking related issues, and concepts [were] display[ed] graphically in the conceptual framework of the final report” as suggested by Weiss (p. 162, 1994).

Also, I grouped these concepts together according to their commonality in order to identify major themes, which became the results of my study. I used the ‘audit’ trail, which tracked the decisions made during the process as a way to ensure the validity. I also used the triangulation method with three data sets collected in three different ways as suggested by LeComp’s (2000): i) the questionnaire form, which aimed to obtain answers to the following questions: (a) their motivation to study in America, (b) the dynamic factors affecting their adjustment process in the new environment, (c) how they cope with these adjustment difficulties, and (d) what the universities can possibly do to help them cope better with their adjustment stress; ii) face to face interview; and iii) answers in the personal reflection sheet, which is similar to the questionnaire form. According to Patton (2002), by doing so the credibility and the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings could be enhanced.

Summary of Findings

The results of the study informed us that Lao and Vietnamese international students have a strong desire to acquire knowledge and graduate with an American degree. Yet, they suffer considerable stress stemming from the discrepancies between the cultures and the educational practices in their home countries and that in America. Following are five findings:

Motivation to Come Study in America

The decision for pursuing higher education in America for all participants is mainly due to the desire for superior education. As explained by Somdy, a female student from Laos “It has always been my dream (since I was young) that I want study in the States because as we know, the United States offers the best education in the world”. Also, they chose the U.S. as their educational destination not only because of the qualities of its graduate schools, but also because of its clout in the world. All of them perceived that American graduate schools have the best education because they have the following qualities: relevant knowledge and skills to their needs, English speaking based institutions, high quality faculty, the upholding of democratic values, and embracing diversity. In addition, theirs and their families’ value which views an American graduate degree as a crucial vehicle for social mobility is also another reason. Based on Ward (1996) who amplified Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the motive behind their migration to the U.S. is important for understanding their cross-cultural adjustment process.
Adjustment Difficulties

To meet the new demands in American graduate programs, all participants had to go through not only academic, but also socio-cultural and socio-psychological adjustment processes. The discrepancies between the cultures and the educational practices that they were accustomed to in their home countries and that in America, language, the stark difference between the former and current living environments, all combined together made their learning experience considerably stressful. This often leads them to culture shock in many aspects. As Somdy, who was shocked by the communication patterns in American classroom, reported that “I think the most culture shock, or dynamic factor that I faced during my two year experience…is the participation in the classroom because I was taught in the Lao education, or in Asian culture to be very reserved”. On the other hand, she said “in America, most of the people, if they know something, or even if they don’t know, they always want to participate in the discussion during the classroom.” The cultural barrier facing these participants, from the Hofstede and Bon’s (1996) Individualism-Collectivism perspectives and within the cultural model of self in Triandis (1989), Markus and Kitayama (1991), could result from the discrepancy in their “construals of self, of others and of interdependence of the [two] (p.1) and that of American students. As Asians, these participants whose culture places importance on the relatedness and “connectedness among individuals”, they find it difficult to adjust to the way of communication of Americans who “seek to maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique inner attributes” (p. 1), as doing so it is contrasted to their core value.

Coping Strategies

Being strongly motivated by their clear academic goal, their sense of efficacy, as well as their desire for superior education is the main motivation for their educational achievement in America. However, in order to achieve their goals, all participants reported that they employed several stress coping strategies, which could be grouped into three main categories: prior arrival preparation, managing change by making up limitation, and developing new perspectives toward the new expectations, in their adjustment processes. As Khai, a male Vietnamese student said “To achieve any goal, studying is not enough. We have to learn from everything, from everyone around us, and be proactive. Don't be passive. That is what I am trying to do.” Within the culture learning perspective, Khai has mostly utilized both informal and incidental learning processes to cope with these cross-cultural adaptation problems.

Also Khamsing who considered himself as a shy person tried to learn to change himself by observing models and understanding American classroom expectations said “During the presentation, I have to talk, as now I know that it is necessary for me to talk...‘Look at other people’, I told myself, ‘how shy they are. They still talk’. Sometimes, their tongues even freeze, they still try to talk.” Doing so, it encouraged him to speak. As suggested in the Lazarus and Folkman (1984)’s stress and coping model, these participants’ stress coping strategies are likely varied depending on the stress experienced by individual and his/her cognitive appraisals of the situations as well as the availability of his/her coping resources, such as prior knowledge about American culture and exposure to the dynamic learning environment. Based on his stress appraisal of situation, Khamsing felt that the needs to speak in the class was urgent and necessary for him. So he decided to employ the managing change, which focus on “making up limitation” as a way to increase his coping resources, which allowed him to cope with stress.
Adjustment Outcomes

Overall participants reported the feeling of growth and valuing of the experiences in their American education. They believe that it helped broaden their horizons, which foster their sense of growth and efficacy. Their cross-cultural interactions and perseverance in overcoming language and cultural barriers, as well as academic adjustment problems, resulted in three important outcomes: satisfaction with academic achievement, feeling of change and unanticipated personal growth. As Khuan, a Lao female student, after being in the new environment for some time and employing certain coping strategies. She made up her limitation by changing some features of her old culture and adopting some new norms. She stated, “I have become a more confident person.” This research finding supports Kim (2001)’s perspective mentioned above concerning stress adaption and growth.

Desired Characteristics of Learning Environment and Support Programs

These participants suggested improvements could be made in the following five areas: a caring and understanding faculty that provided more guidelines in learning techniques, patient American classmates, more international students in the classroom, appropriate orientation in learning American culture, and some intervention programs prior to arrival and during the beginning period of the graduate program.

Conclusions and Implications

The insights into the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of Lao and Vietnamese graduate students are important for both higher education and adult education. These students’ desired learning environment and their needs of special support from faculty could be useful for adult educators in identifying which aspects of their teaching approach and classroom environment nature foster these students’ learning and accelerate their adjustment. This would enable educators to adjust their teaching styles and curriculum so that they can avoid empowering one group of learners and silencing the others. As suggested by Alfred (2005), adult educators can create a change in their classroom culture by including “a cross-national or pluralistic perspective in the curriculum when appropriate, and [by] promot[ing] diversity as an asset and not as a deficit” (p. 10). As such, it would help these students overcome their cultural barriers, which is significant not only for their academic performance, but also their identity development.

Moreover, the results of this study are also important for higher education institutions in general and especially for those that aim to respond to the growing needs of students with diverse backgrounds brought about by the emergence of social and economic factors as observed by Merriam and Cafferrerlla (1999). Given the fact that these students have limited knowledge of American culture, they need both internal and external support. As observed by Antonia Darder (2005) who addressed on her keynote in the 9th Urban Forum at UWM that while “most U.S. universities enjoy and proudly announce that they have students from all over the world learning on their campuses, their administrators and educators do not really take any serious measures to form a support community or design programs that really address the needs of these students” (November, 2, 2005). Thus, based on their social and cultural needs, higher education institutions can improve their campus’ environment by encouraging the educational policy-makers to launch a campaign to create a heightened awareness of the existence of multiple cultures and the presence of international students, especially those from Asian countries. Unless they do so, they
cannot help students with unique needs, including Lao and Vietnamese international students, reach their academic goals without significant negative experiences. Nor can they ensure that their graduate education programs will be able to provide a chance for all students to succeed, regardless of their ethnicities, nationalities and historical backgrounds.

References


Buasawan Simmala, Department of Administrative Leadership, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201. E-Mail: bsimmala@uwm.edu

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