Research Proposal

The Effects of Group Work among Chinese International Graduate Students

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Abstract

Adaptation process to a new environment plays an important role in an international college students’ academic achievement. Based on previous studies, the Chinese international students were facing social and academic challenges while adapting to the US social life and learning system in a private university. The major sources of their challenges were: language barriers, social adjustment, and understanding English lectures. Quantitative and qualitative data collections are used to investigate the effects of group work among Chinese international students at an American University. The 30 participants are selected from the second-year Chinese international graduate students who were pursuing their graduate degree at an American University. The implications of this study can help Chinese graduate students to better adapt to the American educational environment and to enhance their cross-cultural experiences in America.

Keywords: social adjustment, language barriers, group work, academic achievement
The Effects of Group Work among Chinese International Students

Statement of the Problem

Chinese international students, who are from a different educational system and cultural environment, experience particular challenges while studying at American universities in the United States. A mixed method study is adopted to examine the effect of a group work on the second-year Chinese international graduate students who were enrolled in higher institution in the United States. Wang, Heppner, Fu, Zhao, Li and Chuang, (2012) stated that Chinese international students have encountered more difficulties in their cross-cultural adjustment process than any other international students. Furthermore, in previous studies, it has demonstrated that social adjustment and language barriers are two main challenges that Chinese international students experienced while studying in the United States (Wang et al., 2012). There are 30 participants in all. Face to face interviews and survey are the methods of collecting data. Practical implications for instruction are discussed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the effect of group work among Chinese graduate students and its impact on their adaptation in the United States and their academic achievement. Many studies explored the difficulties experienced by the Chinese international students. They are encountering social and academic challenges while pursing their graduate degrees in the American universities and colleges in the United States. According to previous studies, social adjustment and language deficiency had a negative impact on their academic performance.
Sherry, Thomas, and Chui stated that, “The deficiency in English affects international students’ academic performance and impacts their ability to socially interact with others” (as cited in Xue, 2013, p. 1).

**Statement of the Problem**

It has demonstrated that the acculturation style between China and the US is the main reason of the Chinese students’ social adjustment to American campuses life (Samovar & Porter, 1991). Berry (1997) stress-coping framework focused on the sojourners’ adaptation to the new cultural life. He continued to believe that the cross-cultural experience is considered an important life event which is portrayed by stress. Moreover, it is clarified the “differences in the educational system and social norms” played an important role in Chinese international graduate students’ acculturative stress (Berry, 1977). Therefore, it is important to find practical implications to help Chinese international students to overcome their stress and find coping processes to adapt better to the social life at American universities in the United States.

**Limitations in Current Research**

This study examines the effects of group work on second-year Chinese international graduate students at a private suburban university and their active participation in group work. The 30 participants of the study are a sample of convenience. This research cannot be generalized; as the study is based on a small sample of Chinese international graduate students.

**Scope of the Study**
This exploratory study investigates the impact of group work on the Chinese international students and examines the students’ social adjustment and academic performance. The study takes place over a twelve-week period during their second-year in an American university in the United States. Survey questions are to be completed within a two-week period. The researcher uses the students’ emails to send the questionnaire. Interviews are conducted with 30% of the students, randomly selected, from the 30 participants. Five females and five males are randomly selected to participate in face-to-face interviews.

Expected Contributions of This Study

In a previous study, Asian students showed positive attitudes towards group discussions as they reported that they could interact with students from diverse cultural background, enhance their English language skills, and promote their cultural understanding (Li and Campbell, 2008). In this study, the researcher explores the influence of group work among Chinese international graduate students, and its impact on their social adjustment and academic achievement in an American university in the US. It is expected that Chinese international students have been positively affected by interacting with students, faculty and staff while participating in group work throughout their educational experiences inside the campus. The goal of this study is to promote the importance of using group work inside and outside the classroom to help international college students better communicate with people, improve their social adjustment and enhance their academic achievement.

Overall Plan of This Paper
The sections of this paper are as follows: Section 1 is the statement of the problem; Section 2 is the literature review; section 3 is the methodology; section 4 is the discussion and summary. In addition, there is a reference section to support the documentation.

Theoretical Background

There is a clear manifestation that there is an overflow of international students in the United States, with 732,277 enrolled in American universities during the 2010-2011 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2011). Wang et al. (2012) had demonstrated that Chinese international students are considered the largest international students group studying in the United States. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2012), Chinese students were concentrated in pursuing graduate degrees in the US (as cited in Xue, 2013). Thus, such a fast growing Chinese population in the United States deserves a special attention to help them adjust better to life in American universities. Yang and Clum (1994) argued that the stress and the adjustment process of the international students were mainly because of the differences of Chinese and the United States cultures.

Sawir (2005) claimed that in recent studies, international students are facing social and academic issues in universities mainly because of “differences in learning style, culture shock, homesickness, social difficulties – the problem they themselves most often refer to is difficulties with English” (p. 567). Furthermore, research has indicated that Chinese students coping experiences in the United States are more stressful than European and Asian students (Samovar & Porter, 1991). Several studies have demonstrated that there are relationships between social
interaction and the adjustment of international students in American universities (Surdam & Collins, 1984; Zimmerman, 1995). Church (1982) suggested that international students experience a variety of social challenges when matriculating at American universities in the United States. Due to the differences between Chinese and American education system and cultures, the majority of international students are experiencing many challenges at American universities in the United States. A study by Wong (2004) used interviews with international students. In the findings, the researcher stated that many international students, familiarized to a didactic and teacher-centered environment with less classroom conversation; it found it hard for them to make the transition from passive learning to active learning. Furthermore, his study found that the international students reported that their lack of English language proficiency in the classroom, exacerbated by cultural barriers, was a main source of learning difficulties and that affects their academic achievement.

There are a variety of theoretical perspectives that focused on the importance of group work and group development. Social scientists and practitioners supported the idea that group work move through different stages. The most commonly used model is the work of Tuckman (1965) who profoundly clarified the four stages of group development which combined together to facilitate learning and improve social interaction. The four stages are the following:

*Forming* refers to the early stages of a group’s life as people come together and begin to find ways to interact and share common purpose;
Storming is the stage where group roles, relationships and values are contested and negotiated, including issues of leadership and control; Norming refers to the stage at which group roles, norms and expectations begin to be established; and Performing describes the point at which group processes are established and the group is able to work within these constraints in relatively effective ways. (as cited in Frances, 2008, p. 10)

Adams and Hamm (1990) defined group work as a form of cooperative learning means that several people collaboratively work together to complete a specific task and achieve a certain learning goal (as cited in Xue, 2013). In previous studies, researchers have claimed that “group work could arouse students’ learning interests, cultivate their exploring ability and creative thinking and improve their team spirit and social communication skills” (Xue, 2013, p. 3). Further, Staw (2004) focused on the importance of group interaction as it helps each member in the group to learn from each other and fosters collective learning.

Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) explained that the deficiency in English has a negative impact on international students’ academic performance and affects their interaction with others (as cited in Xue, 2013). Perkins (1977); Yan and Berliner (2011) elucidated that Chinese students are bound to face great challenges and difficulties in adjusting to American pedagogical culture due to the great differences between Chinese and American nations (as cited in Xue, 2013). Accordingly, this is considered the most influential foreign student groups in American
universities. Xue (2013) outlined that “In China, the class is usually didactic and teacher-centered with fewer interactions, and independent thinking and learning have always been stressed” (p. 2). However, group work is considered one important characteristic of U.S. education; educators concern about cooperative learning in their classrooms (Xue, 2013). Thus, Chinese students bound to encounter problems while adapting to a new pedagogical culture (Sawir, 2005).

In recent studies, Weimer (2009) stated that group work can create powerful learning experiences for students as it helps to develop students’ problem solving, teamwork and communication skills. Many researchers have demonstrated that “group work is beneficial to L2 learners by offering many and diverse opportunities of interacting directly with the target language” (Xue, 2013, p. 3). Long and Porter (1985) explained the importance of engaging L2 learners to participate in small groups in the classroom than using teacher-centered approach (as cited in Xue, 2013). Holmes (2004) has claimed that Asian students expressed their lack of interest in participating in group work mainly because of their English language deficiency and their limited interpersonal communication skills (as cited in Xue, 2013). In other previous studies, it has demonstrated that group work has a positive impact on international students as it improves students’ conversational skills and increases their opportunities of practicing the language (Xue, 2013). A study by Bejarano (1987) further supported the idea of using cooperative small group inside the classroom as it facilitates second language learning.

Methodology
Research Design

In this paper, the data reported is derived from a larger study of the impact of group work among international college students. A questionnaire is used as an effective method to collect data. Some measures will be collected from participants are scale-rated responses to specific questions, while others were open-ended questions in interviews. All interviews were conducted in English language.

Instrument

Interviews and a survey are the two instruments that are used in this study. The present study examines the Chinese international students’ lived experiences with group work. Moreover, it investigates the effects of group work on their academic performance by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do group work influence Chinese international students’ social adjustment at an American university in the United States?

2. What is the impact of group work on Chinese international students’ academic achievement?

In a previous study, a survey was used to measure the international college students’ social adjustment and academic achievement in an American university. In developing a questionnaire in this study, a modification of a previous survey is done in order to measure the effects of group work on Chinese international graduate students. The participants should respond to four statements, using a Likert-type scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree,
regarding their experience working in groups and how it helps them to improve their social skills and better interact with faculty members, staff and students. Other statement is asking students whether cooperatively working in groups and interacting with others help them to better adapt to the US social life. Furthermore, in the questionnaire, the researcher stresses on examining if using group work inside the classroom enables the participants to better understand their lectures and improve their communication skills. Last, the researcher investigates whether group work helps them to improve their academic achievement. In the interviews, the researcher uses open-ended questions to investigate students’ experiences with campus life and their interaction with their peers, staff and faculty members. Moreover, the researcher examines the participants’ group work experiences in the classroom and the effects of group work on their academic achievement.

Variables

This study contains one independent variable and two dependent variables. The independent variable is group work among Chinese international graduate students in a private university in the U.S, which is represented by the x-axis. The first dependent variable is the students' social adjustment and is represented by the y-axis. In addition, when using group work as the independent variable, students’ academic achievement is used as the second dependent variable, and is represented by the y-axis.

Hypothesis
The more the Chinese graduate students participate in group work or team work, the better they are able to adapt to the US social life and improve their academic achievement.

**Participants**

All 30 participants in the study are second-year Chinese international graduate students in a private university during their second-year in an American university. The participants are pursuing a graduate degree in Business School, with a variety of majors in Human Resources, Marketing, and Finance. A total of ten participants are conducted in an interview. Five females and five males are randomly selected from the 30 participants to participate in face-to-face interviews. Participants’ names were not given in this study to maintain confidentiality.

**Setting of the Study**

Upon requesting permission to get the individual email addresses of the participants, the participants provide their personal email addresses for use in implementing the study. All participants were emailed a questionnaire consisting of four statements, using a Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The participants are given two weeks to complete the questionnaire. Interviews are conducted in the researcher’s office. Each interview should last for approximately 30 minutes.

**Discussion**

**Implications and Implementations**

The findings of a previous study showed that there are changes in behaviors and attitudes towards group work. Xue (2013) stated that initially the participants’ attitudes towards group
work went through changes from inadaptation to later adaptation; the researchers also found out that the time for their social adjustment ranged from half a year to one year. It is demonstrated that their initial dislike was mainly due to two reasons: “limited English proficiency in speaking and listening, and pedagogical differences between the U.S. and China” (Xue, 2013, p. 6). According to previous studies’ findings, Chinese international students need social support. Effective educators should use various instructional activities which are most efficient, and which would provide learners with skills that they could use for academic and communicative purposes; for instance, working in pairs and small groups are effective teaching methods that enable Chinese international students to improve their social interaction and promote their four language skills at all levels. Tweed and Lehman (2002) threw light on Socratic-oriented American professors who used questioning, discussing, and group work in their classroom.

Group work and student participation in the classroom will enhance students’ academic lectures comprehension. For example, students can be assigned in groups of two or three to complete class assignments collaboratively. Using play-role activities inside the classroom are effective group work activities that help language learners to improve their communication skills and increase their social interaction. Accordingly, this will facilitate their adaptation to the social life in the US. Faculty researchers explained effective learning activities to be used in college classroom to foster collaborative group work by saying, “Ask students to relate what they are learning to their lives, their work, their families, and society with activities such as role-plays, case studies, and application papers” (Weimer, 2009, p. 10).
Professors should use effective teaching strategies that help international students to improve their pedagogical learning and enhance their four language skills. For example, opening discussions in the classroom help ESL students to work cooperatively with their peers, develop their vocabulary and improve their language learning. Questioning is an essential strategy that enable language learners to increase their talking time and to dynamically communicate with the teacher and with their classmates. Moreover, it enables them to improve their output as well as understand the teacher’s input. Surdam and Collins (1984) suggested that the more Asian students socially interact with Americans in their leisure time, the more they adjust to new social norms in the US. Moreover, some research highlighted that the implementation of peer programs inside campuses helps to improve international students’ social skills and improves their interaction with others (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992).

**Summary**

The results of the previous study revealed that both social and linguistic challenges were reported by Chinese international students have negative impact on their academic achievement. This study focuses on the effects of group work on the newly-arrived Chinese international students’ social interaction and academic achievement. Effective recommendations and suggestions for Chinese international graduate students were discussed in previous studies to improve their academic learning. Leading class discussion and working in groups are effective methods attempted to capitalize on students’ active involvement in the learning process; such cooperative activities also helped in improving their social interaction and academic...
performance. Finally, in this study, there are only 30 participants and should be conducted only at one American university, which might affect the generalizibility of the study. It is suggested that this study be used to another Chinese international students at another American universities to validate findings from this study and other studies.
References


http://www.pcpnet.org/journal/pctp08/frances08.pdf


