

# New Patterns of Crosscultural Learning in Chinese Higher Education

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In the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development* (2010-2020) the Chinese government announced its intention of raising the number of inbound international students in the coming ten years. By 2020 the number was targeted to reach 500,000, which would make China the destination country attracting the largest number of international students in Asia (China Association for International Education [CAFSA] 2010).

This ambition has resulted in significant changes in international student education in China. In 2010, the number of international students studying in China reached 260,000. They came from five continents, including 194 countries and regions (Ministry of Education [MOE] 2011). A total of 107,432 international students were studying for academic degrees, accounting for about 40 percent of the total of 260,000. In response to the increasing number of international students coming for degree programs, the language of instruction has also changed. China's universities began to set up academic courses taught in English in 2006, and has gradually expanded the fields of knowledge and the number of students enrolled year by year.

In 2008, the first English instruction program for graduate study in education and applied psychology was launched in China. The program is mainly delivered by Chinese faculty who are non-native English speakers in a non-English environment. It is thus an adventure in education, a learning journey that deserves exploration in depth. Here I make an attempt to present some of the issues from the perspective of international students, with a focus on their cross-cultural learning experience.

## A Case Study of Northern China

My study used such qualitative methods as participant observation, interviews, and focus group meetings, to understand the experience of a cohort of international students involved in an English language graduate program at a Chinese university.

North University (a pseudonym) is a comprehensive university established in 1946, funded and administered by the Ministry of Education. Since 2003, NU has hosted about 1,000 international students, scholars or trainees annually, from about 75 countries and regions. The number studying for academic degrees is on a steady upward trend. In the fall of 2008, NU started full English instruction graduate degree programs, which are authorized and funded by the MOE. In 2008, 2009, and 2010 these programs have hosted 75 full time students from 21 countries and three continents in the Schools of Chemistry, Education, and Life Sciences.

Of the 75 students, 41 have been studying in the School of Education, in programs in Education and Applied Psychology, and 37 have received full scholarships from the Chinese government, while 12 are senior scholars who had already obtained either MA degrees or doctorate degrees before they came to China. This group of 41 comes from 14 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. All of them were working in tertiary education institutes, governmental offices or non-governmental organizations before coming to China.

## The Participants and Methods

The voluntary participants in the study were a group of 24 students in the Classes of 2008 and 2009, who were in the full English instruction program majoring in education and applied psychology. They are from 14 different countries and of diverse religious back-

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grounds. All have participated in the interviews and eight of them participated in focus group discussions as well.

The interview questions were designed on the basis of previous participant observation in both academic and social activities. The questions asked were very general, such as “What do you hope to achieve at the end of your program?” and “What are your observations and learning in the context of a contemporary Chinese university?” Focus groups were organized for the purpose of triangulating the data collection and analysis. One additional interview with two officers of NU’s International Student Office was held for supplementary information on government policy and school administration issues relating to international student affairs.

The descriptive analysis adopted Knight’s working definition (2004) of the internationalization of higher education, as a process of integrating international, intercultural or global dimensions into the development of post-secondary education and focusing on students’ cross-cultural learning. The data was analyzed around broad cross-cultural learning approaches, which include language, academics, and socio-cultural experiences. Here I present a summary of some of the findings, in these three areas.

### **Language: Mandarin and English**

The study found that language ranked as the most crucial dimension in the cross-cultural learning process. This was true for both English and Mandarin. These students were different from most other international students in China in that they were not prepared in Mandarin before coming to China. The English instruction curriculum included only a 60 hour beginning Mandarin course, which gave them minimal linguistic skill training. None of the students felt the Mandarin course was adequate for their needs. Neither was the time allowed enough nor was the pedagogical approach satisfactory.

Nevertheless, the students made great efforts to overcome barriers in Mandarin communication. This included using sign language and seeking help from friends who were bilingual in Mandarin and English,

also exchanging language lessons. The most efficient strategy reported by many was seeking help from their English speaking Chinese friends. To assist the students with more Mandarin learning resources, the program coordinator organized extra non-credit Mandarin classes, given voluntarily by Chinese graduate students. For those who are determined to pursue further academic studies in China, they will have to continue their Mandarin education.

As the only language medium for academic work, English had a more critical and direct impact on their learning experience. None of the students speaks English as their mother tongue. They acquired their knowledge of English in various contexts, while the English used in the program has its own unique characteristics. This has resulted in some additional barriers in the initial communication among the students and with their teachers. However, the main difficulty has been caused by a lack of sufficient English language resources for their studies.

NU enjoys rich resources in terms both of faculty and of such academic facilities as libraries, laboratories, and IT equipment. However, most resources and the main channels of access to the resources are in Mandarin, which makes them inaccessible to the students in the English instruction program. As for other services, there has been a lack of administrative personnel who could communicate in English. Concerned about the need for a more internationalized management, the students taking part in this study suggested the school should deploy more English speaking people.

Moreover, all the participants expressed their concern about the future of English for academic purposes in a Chinese context. Currently, NU’s doctoral programs are all offered only in Mandarin. The international students who intend to continue their doctoral study have to take one year mandatory Mandarin course. The participants in this study observed the insufficient academic Mandarin competence of many other international doctoral students after their one year Mandarin training in NU.

Many MA students wish to do their doctoral study in English. Therefore they hope the university can have more faculty qualified to teach in English at the gradu-

ate level. They believe that English instruction programs will give less stress to international students who are here for graduate study and make Chinese universities highly attractive around the world as well.

The school has made efforts to overcome English language barriers. For example, the school provided simultaneous interpreters to work with those instructors who were not comfortable with English. The school has also recruited a group of bilingual graduate volunteers to assist the non-Mandarin speaking students and deployed a special bilingual faculty member to coordinate the program.

### **Academic Experience**

The students' professional objectives are very diverse, including some of the following roles: curriculum specialists, administrators of higher education, musicologists, psychological consultants, language therapists, experts in early childhood education, ICT experts, and language assessment specialists. The first barrier to their academic progress was the "one size fits all" curriculum. The second academic barrier came from the supervision system. The supervisors were assigned to the students on the basis of mutual research interests. However, sometimes the communication between the students and their supervisors was hindered by language difficulties. The third barrier which was crucial to academic work was the library and other learning resources. As mentioned in the section on language, the students found it extremely tough to find appropriate academic literature in English in a timely and satisfactory way.

To overcome these barriers, the program has drawn on various resources. Though the courses were mainly given by the faculty of NU, the program has invited both domestic and international guest professors who enjoy academic prestige in particular fields. The faculty made special efforts to support the international students by giving extra consulting time, sharing their social and academic connections, and their personal library collection. This high degree of commitment was appreciated by the students and has proved effective. Of the two Classes of 2008 and 2009, 15 MA students have

accomplished their thesis research and defended successfully with three external examiners, who are internationally well established scholars in education. Nine senior scholars have completed the research papers they had been commissioned to do by the UNESCO and the Great Wall Scholarship. Only two students had to drop out for family reasons.

Another significant initiative of the program was the setting up of an "International Seminar series on Educational and Psychological Research." Supervised by the program coordinator, an autonomous student standing committee takes full responsibility for this series of seminars, including inviting papers, evaluating proposals, and organizing each meeting. The seminars have hosted about 100 speakers from 22 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. The experience of developing and organizing these seminars has helped to build up a special culture for the program itself, that values independence, tolerance of difference, listening, and cooperation.

### **Socio-cultural Learning**

Crosscultural learning in the context of this study is not limited to interaction between Chinese culture and the student's culture of origin, but involves multiple cultures, in fact a wide range of cultures from the different parts of the world. Just as the English used for most interpersonal communication is not "standard" English, there is no "standard culture," but multi-cultures. Therefore diversity or multiculturalism is a main characteristic of this program.

All the students in the program enjoy practicing and sharing with other people their chosen cultural and religious beliefs on and off campus. All get opportunities to compare how others' culture varies from their own. Through academic and social interaction, especially through the research seminars and other social activities of the program, cohort members have established special ties with each other.

### Lessons from the Case of NU

The cohort studying in the English instruction graduate education program of NU have explored new patterns of cross cultural learning in higher education in an era of global transformation. The new patterns they've experienced in China are taking shape in collaborative activity between developing countries, in a non-native English language context. During the process the most challenging barriers they faced were the gaps between the "one size fits all" curriculum and the diverse needs of individual students, the lack of language and other academic support from the faculty and the inadequacy of academic facilities such as the library, with its limited English language service and professional literature.

To solve these problems and overcome the barriers, various efforts have been made by both the students and program faculty to ensure that the academic goals could be met. The strategies they adopted included seeking voluntary bilingual learning buddies, language exchange lessons, peer academic sharing and exchange through public seminars organized by the program and inviting international guest professors. Throughout the process, the students have played an active part in co-constructing an academic culture which is unique to this particular program. This jointly constructed culture is characterized by sharing, cooperating, listening and being tolerant, also constructively critical attitudes crossing cultures and borders.

### Note

1. This is the summary of a longer and more detailed academic article on this subject, which will appear in *Frontiers of Education in China*, Vol. 6, No. 4, December 2011.

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