



THE EDUCATIONAL SOJOURN AND CULTURE SHOCK AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING AT VFSTR, GUNTUR, INDIA

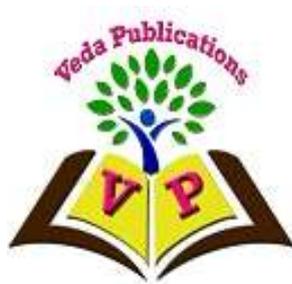
Dr. Ajit Kumar Pradhan, Dr. Poornima Ravinathan, Mr. Nagendra Rao Howji

Assistant Professor of English, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research, (Deemed to University), Vadlamudi, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

Lecturer, Department of Political Science, JMJ College for Women (A), Tenali, Andhra Pradesh

Assistant Professor of English, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research (Deemed to University), Vadlamudi, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

ABSTRACT



The present study makes an attempt to link between the educational sojourn and cultural shock by interacting with the international students studying various programmes at Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research (VFSTR), Deemed to be University, Guntur, India. It is natural that when one is exposed to an unfamiliar culture, there would be some experiences which would be 'shocking' or 'unpleasant'. Most of these experiences would make the person discomfort. On the other hand, some of the experiences could be pleasant. The present study also aims to explore these experiences among international students studying at VFSTR. The study was undertaken by administering a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol to ten international students from Sudan pursuing various programmes at VFSTR. Further, the interview was recorded and later transcribed. Three themes emerged from the interview which are: *language issues, making friends and pleasant experiences*. The study makes suggestions to the host institutes admitting international students in academic courses to take special care and conduct special counseling sessions by professional counselors.

Keywords: Cultural Shock and Socio-Cultural Theory

**INTRODUCTION**

There are many reasons why one needs to travel to different countries and one of the reasons which is frequently observed among young mass is for higher education. While travelling to a completely 'new' cultural set-up, there is always a chance to experience which would be 'shocking' and completely unwanted. This could lead to many psychological issues like stress and depression which may generate a negative perception of the local culture and indirectly people of that locality. This could be one of the de-motivating factors in the process of language learning.

The present study analyses experiences of foreign national studying in various courses at VFSTR, which is located in a rural set-up in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, India.

WHAT IS CULTURAL SHOCK?

The term culture shock has been defined by many. However, Oberg (1960) is considered to be one of the initial promoters of the term, who believes that 'culture shock' is an experience by any person who is from a different culture and experiences something which is completely new or unfamiliar. Culture shock has been generally perceived in a negative way.

According to Longman dictionary of Applied Linguistics culture means "*strong feelings of discomfort, fear, or insecurity which a person may have when they enter another culture. For example, when a person moves to live in a foreign country, they may have a period of culture shock until they become familiar with the new culture.*" (Reichards & Schmidt, 2010)

Although, there have been many attempts by various researchers, Ward et al. (2001) provides a succinct explanation of culture shock. Referring to Ward et al. (2001), culture shock has six various aspects as highlighted by Furham (2012).

1. Strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations.
2. A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions.
3. Being rejected by/and or rejecting members of the new culture.

4. Confusion in role, role expectations, values.
5. Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences.
6. Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

Apart from the term 'cultural shock', there are many similar terminologies used to express similar issue, which include 'cultural differences', 'disorientation', 'mental shock', 'anxious confusion' and others. (Furham, 2012).

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY

There has always been close relationship between language, culture and society. One of the major theories based on this relationship is Socio-cultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) is the proponent of the learning theory which is based on the principle that learning best happens in a socially and culturally involved atmosphere. Learning as per this theory happens through social interaction. Socio-cultural theory emphasizes the role of social relationship and participation in cultural activities in the process of language learning. Vygotsky uses the concept Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the distance or gap between what learners can do with support and without support. As per ZPD learners use different collaborative techniques when they encounter similar issues in future to address any issues.

THE STUDY: SAMPLE, PROCEDURE AND TOOL

The sample of the study includes ten international students from Sudan studying undergraduate courses at VFSTR. Out of ten students two were female students and eight were male students. All the respondents belong to age group between 20-25years. They have been in India from two months to one year. It shows that they have recently been to India for study purpose. Many of respondents, nine out of ten, do not have exposure of visiting any other country than India.

A semi-structure interview was conducted after getting responses on culture shock through a questionnaire. The questionnaire has eight items which intends to find out respondents views on their personal experiences in the host country, i.e. India. In



the follow up interviews, a detailed cultural experience was sought.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the paper discusses results and discussion obtained from the two research tools i.e. questionnaire and interview protocol. This study adopts and adapts the culture questionnaire prepared by Baier S. T. (2005) as it is comprehensive and relevant to Indian context.

RESULTS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire was administered to ten international students to find out their cultural experiences in India. All the students belong to Sudan and they all have come to VFSTR for academic reason like higher studies. All the ten students have been pursuing one of the undergraduate courses i.e. Bachelor of technology, bachelor of Pharmacy and Bachelor of Computer Application.

There are eight different areas where the respondents were asked to provide their responses in the three point likert scale (i.e. Never, Sometimes

and Often). The followings are the eight items of the questionnaire.

1. Have you been homesick?
2. Have you felt depressed?
3. Have you felt discriminated by Indian?
4. Have you felt stressed in meeting academic requirements?
5. Have you been sick?
6. Have you had any eating problems?
7. Do you feel the need of assistance in coping with the new culture?
8. Have you felt better in Indian culture than your home country?

All these above items of the questionnaire attempt to get cultural experiences of the international students. The following Figure (Figure 1) provides respondents' responses on each item of the questionnaire.

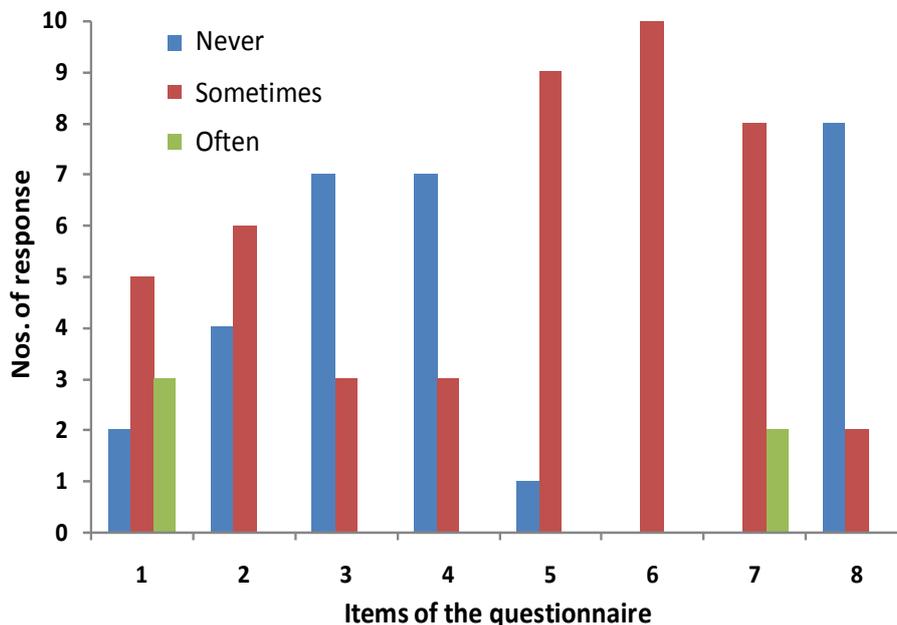


Figure 1: International Students' Responses on Cultural Shock

Responding to the item whether the participants feel homesick, there was a mixed responses. Three respondents say often they miss their home, five say sometimes and two states that they never feel homesick. As the students have come for studies of late, and even some of them have come out of their

country just two months before; it is quite natural that they would feel homesick.

No respondents state that they always feel depressed. Six of them feel depressed sometimes; however four of them state that they never feel depressed. As the students have come to a completely unfamiliar academic atmosphere, the



demand of the academic and staying away from familiar persons are the primary causes of such feelings.

Responding to the item, whether the respondents ever felt discriminated based on their colour or religion, all of them state that it was not often. Seven of the respondents believe that they have never felt such experience and three of the respondents feel it 'sometimes'. As per the responses of the respondents there are less academic requirements to make them depressed. However, nine respondents state that they sometimes feel sick. The primary reason of feeling sick is due to spicy food which they are not so used to.

Many respondents are of the opinions that they need a counselor for academic and psychological supports, preferable from their own country. Responding to the question whether they feel better in Indian culture than their own cultures, many are of them have negative opinion. Eight of the respondents believe that they never felt better in Indian culture and two of the state that they sometimes feel better in Indian culture. However, no one states that she/he feels better in Indian culture always. This shows that the international students studying at VFSTR miss their countries a lot.

RESULTS FROM INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

A semi-structured interview was administered with the same ten respondents to find more about their experiences with Indian culture. Their responses could be categorized into three major themes which include *good experiences*, *language issues* and *issues with making friends*. The respondents were asked to narrate in detail on their experiences. The vignettes of some of the respondents have been given below.

VIGNETTES OF GOOD EXPERIENCES

Respondent A "One day, I had been out to buy some fruits. I was struggling to make the vendor understand what I needed. In the meantime, an unknown person behind me, came forward and assisted me (without my request) and spoke to the vendor in the local language and solved my problem. People are really very helpful!"

Respondent B "One day I went out to buy a blanket from the local market. I got down in the bus station and asked about the nearest place where I could buy

a blanket. People with good gesture directed me to a good shopping mall and thus I got a nice blanket with affordable price".

Respondent C "I had kidney stone issue and it had to be operated. All my Indian friends were very nice to take me to the right hospital and assist me throughout. Thanks to my friends' assistance, I recovered fast"

VIGNETTE OF LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

Respondent D "During my initial days here at Vignan, I tried to communicate with the hostel warden in English regarding paying of hostel fees...although I was able to understand the warden what he wanted to ask, I was not able to make him understand...Further, a lady caretaker who cleans my room does not know English, I use online 'Google translator' and use only words to express myself. We don't have many problems these days"

VIGNETTE OF MAKING FRIENDS

Respondent C "Making friends in India is not easy, especially with strangers and unknown people. Once, I happened to make friends with a stranger on my way to a place, but the person didn't reciprocate. However, in my country it is very easy to make friends. You can talk to strangers and make friendship with them easily"

It can be noticed from the narrations that the respondents have mixed opinion regarding Indian culture. Although some experiences are positive, some experiences are not as expected by them.

Conclusion, Suggestions and recommendations

The present study makes an attempt to find out international students' exposure to Indian culture. The students are in India for higher education purposes. An exploratory study method was adopted to find out the students exposure and it was carried out through administering questionnaire and interview protocol. The ten students from Sudan were first asked to provide their experiences through a questionnaire and later interviewed to find more about their culture shock. It was found that almost all the students miss their culture, especially when it comes to food and social meetings. Further, making friendship with strangers in India is not easy as compared to the students' native culture. However, the respondents have a very high opinion regarding Indian culture, especially when it comes to helping



during illness and other related issues. The study highlights that there were not many 'culture shock' among international students studying at VFSTR.

The implications of the study can be related to students, teachers and administrators who always closely interact with the international students. All of them need to be a little more sensitive and understand the cultural differences of international students. Further, as suggested by a few students, a professional counselor needs to be appointed, exclusively for international students. VFSTR has already a very systematic and effective counseling system to encounter such issues.

Further studies can be carried out on international students of VFSTR on the areas of 'adjustment strategies' to Indian culture and 'reverse cultural shock' when they go back to their home countries.

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