Acculturation Problems of Thai Master's Degree Students in The United Kingdom

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Abstract: *Many Thai students continue their Master's Degree in the United Kingdom because it offers them not only a good education but also an opportunity to live in an English-speaking country. Unfortunately, not everyone can fit into the new environment. Thus, it is important to investigate the acculturation problems in order to help Thai students find an appropriate adjustment method to handle the mismatch between cultures. The study examines socio-cultural, psychological and communication adjustment of 35 Thai Master's Degree students in the United Kingdom. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, using Berry's (2005) bi-dimensional acculturation theory as a framework to analyze the data. To solve the problems, the finding reveals that Thai students should socialize with other local and international friends to increase their linguistic and cultural knowledge. The pre-departure training program should also be arranged to prepare Thai students for the cultural and language excellence and to enhance Thai students' appreciation of their own culture as well as understanding other cultures.*

1. Introduction

Many Thai students decide to continue their Master's Degree in the United Kingdom because it offers them not only a good quality of education but also an opportunity to live in an English-speaking country (Tarry, 2008). The number of Thai students who wish to further their education in the United Kingdom keeps increasing every year. According to the Royal Thai Embassy in London (2005), there were approximately 4,300 Thai students in the United Kingdom in 2006. Then, the number reached 6,175 in the year of 2017 (The UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2018). However, living in the unfamiliar environment could cause stress or even emotional breakdown. Many students have problems adapting themselves to the host society in which the values, norms, beliefs and lifestyles differ from their home country. Therefore, it is important that this issue be investigated in order to help Thai students find a better intercultural adjustment method.

The study has two main purposes. The first aim is to investigate the acculturation problems in terms of communication, socio-cultural and psychological issues that Thai Master's Degree students encountered when studying in the United Kingdom. The second aim is to study how the students handle those acculturation problems and adapt themselves in order to live in the host culture. It is hoped that the result could be useful for designing the training programs to prepare Thai students before going to the United Kingdom. Moreover, this study may help the educational policy makers to realize the importance of putting intercultural knowledge into English classes, instead of focusing on linguistic issues only. Finally, although this research study only investigates Thai Master's Degree students in the United Kingdom, it could be a guideline for any further studies to explore the intercultural adjustment of Thai students in other countries.

2. Definitions of the Terms

Berry (2005) proposed that to understand the complete process of acculturation, the socio-cultural and psychological issues should be investigated together. However, according to Berry's bi-dimensional theory, assimilation is not the only outcome of acculturation. There are basically four outcomes of acculturation. Hence, the definitions of acculturation, socio-cultural and psychological adjustment, and acculturation outcomes are defined based on Berry (2005, pp. 698-704)

Acculturation is "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Thus, to understand the acculturation process, changes at the group and individual levels must be explored. At group level, Berry proposed that the attitude of the dominant culture to the new joiners—negative or positive, open or closed—also had an impact on the sojourners' acculturation process. On the other hand, at an individual level, personal perspective also has an influence on how one adapts to the new culture. Berry (2005) explained that every individual adopts a different acculturation strategy due to the individual differences. The personality traits are an important factor which influence how individuals interact in particular situations (John, Naumann & Soto, 2008). People who have a positive attitude toward the new culture and are open to learning new things will adapt themselves better than those who are closed (Berry 2005; Lewthwaite, 1996; Tsai, 2011). Nevertheless, individual differences alone cannot depict the complete picture of acculturation. The investigation should be done at group and individual level. To illustrate, we cannot conclude that a person is successfully assimilated to the new culture because he/she has the positive attitude toward the host society. If the new society does not welcome the new members, his/her acculturation process might turn out to be dissatisfactory. Hence, as Berry (2005) suggested, changes at group and individual level must be studied together.

In addition, to study the acculturation problems, the individual socio-cultural and psychological adaptation must be investigated (Berry, 2005). Although socio-cultural and psychological adjustments are different from each other, they have a close relationship that influences the direction of one's adjustment (Tsai, 2011). That is, both types of adaptation have an influence on each other. For example, if the socio-cultural adjustment develops well, the sojourners might not feel stressed affecting their psychological adjustment. On the other hand, if the sojourners have personal strength and good attitude toward the new culture, they will be more eager and happy to adapt themselves to the new environment. Thus, since the socio-cultural and psychological adjustments influence each other, they should be investigated together in order to gain a better understanding of acculturation process.

- *Socio-cultural adjustment* refers to the understanding of the new social and cultural system of the host culture that the sojourners move into, such as values, norms, language, lifestyle and practices.
- *Psychological adjustment* refers to the adjustment which involves how the sojourners gain stress or satisfaction when they acculturate in the new culture. This kind of adjustment results in individual changes in terms of psychological and physical well-being.
- *Communication* is the activity of sending and receiving the message through various methods such as speech, writing and signals. Communication is divided into verbal and non-verbal forms (Samovar & Porter,

2001). The verbal communication is a form of communication through spoken and written messages while non-verbal communication refers to the body language of the speaker such as facial expressions, voice tone, gestures and postures.

There are four outcomes of acculturation:
- *Integration* refers to when the sojourners decide to maintain their home cultural characteristic and learn the new one at the same time.
- *Assimilation* occurs when the sojourners drop their heritage cultural characteristics and turn completely to the mainstream culture.
- *Separation* refers to when the sojourners hold on to their heritage culture and resist the host society.
- *Marginalization* is when the sojourners exclude themselves from society by rejecting both cultures.

3. Methodology

The participants of this study consist of 35 Thai graduate students who were in the United Kingdom for their Master's Degree during the academic years 2009 to 2012. The participants must meet the research conditions; that is, they finished the program in one year and had never been living in the United Kingdom before their Master's degree. A convenience sampling method was employed for participant selection. Since the concerned organizations, such as Royal Thai Embassy in London and The Old England Students Association under Royal Patronage, could not reveal the MA holders' contact information due to individual privacy, the researcher was able to approach only those with the information in hand.

This study makes use of the mix-method design which is the combination of the quantitative and qualitative approaches. After the questionnaire survey, three volunteers who hold different points of view were approached for a twenty-minute interview. Berry's (2005) bi-dimensional acculturation theory, focusing on socio-cultural and psychological issues, was adopted as the framework while the 4 strategies of acculturation—integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization—were used to analyze the process of individual intercultural adjustment.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study have been divided into two sections which are socio-cultural and psychological issues. The communication problems and solutions are discussed in the socio-cultural section.

4.1 Socio-cultural Problems and Solutions

Since there are many different nationalities of students in the classroom, the acculturation strategy is different from the method used outside the classroom. The classroom culture is like a melting pot which includes a variety of cultures. The lack of knowledge and awareness about other cultures can lead to the misunderstanding and unintentional conflicts among classmates. Without cultural understanding, international students might interpret their classmates' message according to home cultural values. Therefore, it is important that students have knowledge about other cultures.

According to one of the interviewees, he consoled his British classmate who had low scores like him with laugh and smile to show that they were in the same boat. The British classmate, in turn, interpreted his action as an offense. Due to the lack of cultural knowledge, both misunderstood each other which can consequently lead to social avoidance. The interviewee revealed that he preferred making friends with Asians to the Westerners because their cultures were quite similar to Thai. Therefore, he did not need to expend much effort in adapting himself when talking with Asian friends.

To communicate appropriately, Thai students need to be interculturally competent. The intercultural competence refers to an ability to understand and appreciate the cultural differences with the positive attitude. A person should be willing to learn and gain more knowledge in order to interact and communicate effectively in the certain context (Bennett, 1993; Collier, 1994; Byram, 1997; Kim, 2002; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Deardoff & Jones, 2012). Students must be aware of cultural differences and willing to gain knowledge about other cultures in order to understand other people and develop their self-growth to be interculturally competent (Byram, 1997). That is, they should be able to use their cultural understanding and language skill to communicate and interact appropriately with other people from different cultures. Also, they should have awareness that people from different backgrounds have different beliefs and values; therefore, the same behavior can have different meanings in different cultures. To gain the intercultural competence, language proficiency is a necessary tool (Byram, 1997). Unfortunately, many Thai students in the study reported having communication problems.

As Xiao and Petraki (2007) put it, language proficiency is the most frequent problem found among international students. If a student's English language level is low, the chance that they will integrate themselves into a new culture could be slim. The finding shows that although living in the same society and studying in the same class, the high English proficiency students tend to have fewer obstacles in acquiring cultural knowledge than the lower proficiency ones. This finding is consistent to the observations by Xiao and Petraki (2007) and Shackleford (2011). Since English is a tool to gain knowledge and receive new information through the four skills (listening, writing, speaking and reading), students with higher language proficiency would be able to utilize their language skills in communication better than the lower proficiency group.

According to the findings, the varity of accent is considered as one of the most difficult communication problems in the classroom for Thai students. Since the classmates are from many different countries, their accent could sound different and might not be easy for Thai students to understand. The Thai accent, on the other hand, could be difficult for other people to understand, too. In order to improve language proficiency, Thai students believe that they should take an extra English course and study by themselves. Also, the communication with other friends from different cultures is important to develop their linguistic and cultural knowledge. However, the finding shows that many students prefer keeping themselves to their conational friends. The group separation consequently divides students into groups and bars the outsiders (classmates from other different cultures) even if there is no intention to do so. In addition, Thai students reported that the university did not provide enough activities for international students to socialize and familiarize themselves with new classmates. As a result, the opportunity of learning and adjusting to the new culture could be slim.

Apart from adjusting to classmates, Thai students also have to adapt to the new Western teaching and learning style which requires students to be active and critical in class. In contrast, the Asian style is more or less like a rote learning in which teachers would prepare the knowledge for students. The way of Asian learning is to be passive and receive information that teachers provide. Moreover, most Thai tests are multiple choice format while the Western style normally tests students with a written exam which requires a writing skill. The difference between the home and host culture could put more burdens to Thai students. That is, not only do they prepare the lesson before class, but they also have to adapt themselves to the different style of teaching and learning.

On the other hand, the acculturation outside classroom is not a big issue. To adjust to the local society, the easiest solution is to observe and follow other people. If a clarification is needed, asking friends or a local person directly is the best way to deal with the socio-cultural problems. Thai students believe that the acculturation process will progress faster if there are opportunities for them to join activities and socialize with other people in the society.

In terms of racism and discrimination, it was not reported problematic as the local people were nice and helpful to Thai students. The attitude of the host culture to Thai students in the United Kingdom is rather positive, which consequently leads to a healthy psychological well-being. Psychological and socio-cultural issues reinforce each other in the acculturation process. If the students are happy and feel welcomed, it is likely that their adjustment will be fast and easy.

Regarding communication problems, the findings reveal that accent variation is rated as the biggest communication problem. The accent of local people, which is different from the Standard English, is an obstacle to understanding the message. On the other hand, the Thai-English accent, too, is a problem which obstructs other people from understanding Thai students. Moreover, the lack of socio-cultural knowledge—for example, to know the appropriate vocabulary and its level of formality in a certain context—is also a communication problem. To illustrate, it is acceptable to use informal words and slang when talking with friends, whereas talking with the lecturers it is more polite to use formal language. Thus, having linguistic competence alone is not enough for successful communication. Thai students should have both linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge in order to communicate appropriately.

Thus, Thai students should have both linguistic and intercultural cultural knowledge in order to avoid communication errors and use language appropriately in different situations. Before going abroad, the students can prepare themselves by learning English, especially vocabulary, grammar and accent. They should also familiarize themselves with various accents in order to increase their knowledge when interacting with local and international friends. During their stay in the United Kingdom, the best solution for communication problems is to practice and learn the language through socializing with other local people and international friends. Unfortunately, it is reported that Thai students do not have much free time due to the overload of study. Moreover, some of the students find it difficult to socialize with new friends because classmates who come from similar cultures tend to stay in groups. Some Thai students also prefer getting into a group of Thai friends because they share the same linguistic and cultural background. As a result, this behavior hinders Thai students from learning new cultures and improving their communication skills.

4.2 Psychological Problems and Solutions

The most frequent psychological problem found among Thai Master's Degree students is the stress from study. Many Thai students decide to change the field of study in their Master's Degree; as a result, the students have no background knowledge about the new area that they are going to study. Also, studying in English language can be extremely difficult if Thai students do not know the technical terms used in the subject that they are studying. Hence, Thai students have to spend more time than the native speaker students in preparing the lesson, leaving not enough free time for relaxation.

The result shows that the best solution for Thai students to handle stress is to participate in activities with Thai friends in the United Kingdom, such as cooking, shopping or clubbing. Contacting family in Thailand to seek support is also another strategy that Thai students use to release their stress and relieve their homesickness. Technology has become a useful tool to shorten the distance, as the video chatting applications and programs are used for contacting the family in Thailand. As a result, homesickness has not been reported as a difficult problem for Thai students in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the strategy used in dealing with stress and emotional breakdown also depends on personal preference and situation. The results also show that Thai students sometimes prefer spending time to relax themselves alone by reading or watching television. In fact, if Thai students spend time joining activities and interacting with international and local friends, it would also benefit their acculturation progress.

Unfortunately, the university counseling service appears to be the least effective solution for Thai students to seek help and support. Apart from the limitation of activity arranged, another reason could be that Thai students feel more open to reveal their personal issue to close friends than to university staffs whom they do not know. On top of that, the language used in conversation is English which can cause Thai students to feel insecure as they cannot express their thoughts as clearly as they want. As a result, speaking Thai with friends or family could be the best solution for them. However, it also depends on the issue that needs to be sorted out; that is, if the problem is about the university system, university counseling could be the right choice for Thai students. On the other hand, if the matter is personal, Thai students might feel shy to talk to "strangers".

5. Implications of the Study

Although culture shock is unavoidable, a good acculturation preparation is likely to decrease the level of the shock. If the students have background knowledge about the differences between the host and home culture, they tend to have less stress and panic when dealing with the difference between cultures. Therefore, the study results can be applied to design a training program which focuses on enhancing the linguistic skill and socio-cultural knowledge.

To arrange the training course for Thai Master's degree students, the training can be divided into two parts: pre- and post-departure training. The pre-departure training program in Thailand might take a few months to provide basic socio-cultural knowledge and develop communication skills. Specialized vocabulary and general knowledge about the system of basic services in the host country should be taught in the pre-departure training course. In terms of language proficiency, vocabulary teaching must include all of its elements which are syntactic, morphological, and pragmatic characteristics, so that Thai students are able to use vocabulary appropriately in different occasions. The trainer should prepare the list of vocabulary used in

daily life and classroom, such as slang, idioms and terminology. For instance, according to the interview, the lack of banking and money vocabulary is an obstacle to open a bank account because Thai students do not understand the terminology. Moreover, the banking system and regulations in the United Kingdom are different from Thailand. A few international and Thai students have been fined for making mistakes during the tuition fee online payment process.

In addition to the vocabulary, the variety of English must be taught in the training program. Since different varieties of English may not be presented to Thai students in the classroom, some Thai students are not familiar with the phonological features of these varieties. Thus, it is difficult for them to understand local and international accents. It is suggested that the training program get students used to many varieties of English, emphasizing the local accent of the particular area that students will live in. Other international accents can also be included as extra knowledge to prevent Thai students from misunderstanding the accents of international classmates.

Moreover, the style of learning and writing essays must be taught in the pre-departure course. The different style of learning is one of the most difficult problems that Thai students in the United Kingdom encounter. Before going abroad, it is necessary that Thai students understand the Western learning style. The Western academic writing style, too, should be taught in the language class. Providing a mock up class which familiarizes Thai students with the different way of teaching can prevent Thai students from a shocking experience. Through practicing, Thai students will gradually adjust to the Western learning style where students are encouraged to share ideas in class.

Apart from the language proficiency training, intercultural knowledge should also be included in the training. Taboos and inappropriate behaviors should be noted in order to avoid conflicts with the local people. In addition to the pre-departure training in their home country, the university or training institutes in the United Kingdom can also help international students by arranging post-departure training activities, making international and local students aware of cultural difference between their home and the host country (Wilberschied, 2015). As such, the training program could prevent cultural misunderstanding and enable students to interact with other people from different cultural and social backgrounds. Thai students are also encouraged to acquire intercultural knowledge in the United Kingdom by finding opportunities for contact with other people in the host location.

The training can be arranged a month before the first semester starts to spare students' time for activities. According to the research results, many Thai students reported a lack of free time due to the burden of study and homework; thus, starting the training course before the semester starts would remove the time constraint issue. Students could devote their time to complete the training so that the learning process can be developed. After the semester starts, it would be optional whether the training is continued. If it continues, the aim would be to reinforce the performance and follow up the improvement of the students; therefore, the duration could be shortened to once a week as it is a follow-up class.

Another effective solution for acculturation is to provide a counseling service to Thai students. The training course in Thailand may arrange a discussion seminar which allows alumni and students to talk and share experiences. The alumni could leave the contact (email address) for any students who need advice in the future. However, the willingness to share personal contact would depend on the alumni themselves. The

overseas university counseling department, too, should improve its service quality. According to the interview and the results, Thai students do not think that university counseling quality is satisfactory due to the lack of cultural understanding of staffs. Therefore, if possible, universities should also train their staffs to serve the needs of international students. Apart from cultural knowledge, necessary information about university regulations and registration systems should be provided the first day of the semester as these issues are found to be problematic among international students, including Thais.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated acculturation problems and solutions of Thai Master's degree students in the United Kingdom with a hope that the results can raise an awareness of the need for cultural preparation for Thai students. In terms of students who are leaving for their degree, the information can be a guideline for preparation and even prevention of any mistakes and misunderstandings which may happen unintentionally. Moreover, the results can be useful for designing a pre-departure course, teaching language and cultural knowledge for Thai students before going abroad. The study is also intended to raise awareness in the educational policy makers of Thailand to include intercultural knowledge in lessons. As language and culture are related and cannot be separated, it is recommended that both of the elements be taught in class together (Xiao & Petraki, 2007).

Last but not least, it is hoped that this study can be a reference for further studies about acculturation problems. The scope of study does not have to include only Thai culture; other cultures can be studied to gain more insightful information about intercultural communication and to investigate the difficulties that the sojourners have encountered. Moreover, the study raises an awareness of the cultural diversity that can cause misunderstanding between people of different cultures and helps to understand different perspectives on language, identity and intercultural competence. In the near future, it is hoped that Thai students can have a well-prepared training program which can give a better understanding on cultural adjustment and lessen the acculturation problems. Most importantly, the ultimate goal of studying intercultural communication is also to enhance Thai students' appreciation of their own culture as well as understanding other cultures in a hope that the acculturation process can be a positive experience.

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