



General Problems of Foreign Students Studying in Bangkok

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Received : March 11, 2019 / Revised : April 24, 2019 / Accepted : April 24, 2019

Abstract

This study investigated general problems of foreign students studying in Bangkok with three main objectives – 1) study the problems of foreign students studying in Bangkok; 2) explore the main causes of the problems among foreign students; and 3) find out how they deal with their problems. This research used quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting data. The research instruments were questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The sampling used convenience sampling criteria: 65 participants studying in Bangkok were randomly chosen by the researcher. The questionnaire was used to investigate participants' problems living in Bangkok in three main areas of sociocultural adaptation, namely social support, life change, and cultural distance. The semi-structured interview was used to triangulate answers from the questionnaire and to gain more details from the participants.

Keywords: Social Support; Cultural Distance; Life Change

The findings showed that the average score for all factors score 2.25 which mean slightly difficulty. The social support is the most problematic factor with moderate difficulty ($M = 2.71$), while cultural distance ($M = 2.23$) and life change ($M = 1.82$) are at the same level, slight difficulty. Amongst the nine items of sociocultural adaptation problems concerning social support, understanding the local political system is the most problematic item ($M = 3.06$). Regarding the ten items of sociocultural adaptation problems pertaining to life change, dealing with the climate is rated the highest mean score ($M = 2.28$). According to the ten items of sociocultural adaptation problems relating to cultural distance, making themselves understood is the most difficult ($M = 2.65$). Additionally, the results from interviews reveal that the language barrier and face saving are the main difficulties of interviewees. To deal with the problems, there are several solutions suggested by the participants – thinking positively, using Google Translate, using body language, trying to be familiar with the situations and trying to understand and accept Thai system, complying with the local culture and adjusting themselves with Thai people, observing two aspects of things and stories in term of Thai culture, and spending more time with the locals. However, most of participants emphasize that the problems they have do not cause them serious troubles while studying in Bangkok because they consider those difficulties as the challenges to make them grow up in the future.

Introduction

At present, the world is global so many students study abroad because they want to get higher education level. That is, education is not limited for students in those countries but it is open for students all around the world. Paitoon Sinlarat (2013) explains that international students leave their families for further study in foreign countries because it is an opportunity for them to widen their cultural and intellectual experience. Additionally, Titrek, Hashimi, Ali, and Nguluma (2016) mention that economic, political, security, and academic factors drive students to study in other countries. According to the Office of the Higher Education Commission of Thailand research in 2016 found that the status of international students currently studying in public and private higher educational institutions in Thailand was 18,814 foreign students from 139 countries among 105 higher education institutions (62 public and 43 private institutions), covering certificates, bachelor degrees,



graduate diplomas, master degrees, higher graduate diplomas, and doctoral degrees. The result shows that most international students were from Asia, especially the border countries of Thailand (Office of the Higher Education Commission of Thailand, 2016). Bangkok is a good choice for overseas students who want to study in Thailand but when they stay and study in unfamiliar place they may face some difficulties. The level of their problems depends on their abilities to adjust to new environment. If they can alter quickly, they can handle problems well. International students need to overcome cross-cultural problems in order to live in other country happily. In the past, a few studies were done to investigate problems of international students in Thailand (Veenunkarn Rujiprak, 2016; Gu, 2013). The results found that international students are encountered psychological and cultural problems in different aspects. Consequently, this research aims to find out international students' problems while studying in Bangkok based on the sociocultural adaptation of Ward and Kennedy (1999).

Purposes of the Study

This study aimed to explore problems of foreign students studying in Bangkok, to identify the main causes of foreign students' problems and to find out how foreign students deal with the problems occurred. This research provided information for international institutes to be aware of problems facing by foreign students while studying abroad and to consider guidelines on orientation programs, activities preparation for welcoming the new international students, follow-up programs, etc.

Literature Review

Culture Shock

Culture is a very important mechanism for humans because they learn, change, and adapt it to suit their lives in order to survive in their society. The products of culture include language, beliefs, norms, values, technology advances, and so on. Staying in the different culture may cause culture shock. Oberg (1960) defines that "culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all the familiar signs and symbols of social interactions" (p. 142). The signs include words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, norms, languages, beliefs acquired from the social environment unconsciously. Furthermore, Ting-Toomey

and Chung (2005) associate culture shock with the stress and the feeling of disorientation experienced in a new culture. Besides, Baldwin (2015), culture shock/adaptation theory is the stress of living in a new culture over a period of time, and it can be defined as not only the psychological condition but also the physical discomfort experienced by the sojourners. Culture shock is an emotional experience, so later the behavioral confusion and cognitive (thinking pattern) disorientation occurs. In addition, Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) indicate that international students' study higher education in the US have to deal with academic challenges, social isolation, and cultural adjustment. Those academic challenges cover communication with professors, classmates, and staff. How to engage in different group activities is their social isolation problem. As for the cultural problem, they encounter many ways of thinking and doing in the US.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

According to Kim (2017), the cross-cultural adaptation happens as long as the individual stays in communication and tries to harmonize with the new cultural environment. Communication is very important in relation to cross-cultural adaptation because without communication, adaptation cannot occur. Cross-cultural adaptation is considered an effective and reliable measurement method in the study of overseas students (Berry, 1989). Kim (2017) defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relative stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (p. 31).

Cross-cultural adaptation relates to acculturation and deculturation. Acculturation is the learning of the new cultural environment and adapting to the host country. Deculturation is the unlearning of some old cultural elements. Letting go or minimizing aspects of the home culture may ease the adaptation to the new culture. Some habits of the home culture are gradually replaced by the new ones. Initial adaptation is based on the original cultural habits like dress, food, and music. Later, as time goes by, the learning and the adaptation go down into the area of emotion, moral, values, and culture. However, each adaptive change of the individual comes with stress occurring from the resistance to change and the desire to retain the old culture, as well as the necessity to change behavior in order to conform to the new one. The need for acculturation and the resistance of deculturation is a kind of pushing the new culture and pulling the old one together.



Additionally, Ward and Kennedy (1999) divide cross-cultural adaptation into two aspects: psychological adaptation (emotional/affective) and sociocultural adaptation (behavioral). Psychological adaptation refers to psychological well-being or satisfaction which is affected by personality, life change, coping styles and social support. Sociocultural adaptation concerns “the ability to fit in to acquire culturally appropriate skills and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment” (Ward & Kennedy, 1999, p. 660). Sociocultural is the social competence influenced by culture learning and the acquisition of social skills, which include residence time in the new culture, cultural knowledge, amount of interaction and identification with host nationals, cultural distance, language fluency and acculturation strategies (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Psychological adjustment refers to a stress and coping framework, while sociocultural adaptation relates to social skills or cultural learning. Therefore, sojourners need to learn not only culture-specific rules of how to function in the new environment but also the behavioral skills that help them fit into the new culture.

Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) by Ward and Kennedy

The Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) is a measurement of cross-cultural adaptation devised by Ward and Kennedy in 1999. It is a dependable and effective tool for examining sociocultural adjustment. SCAS is a flexible measurement that can be modified according to the research purposes. As this research examines cross-cultural adaptation, particularly sociocultural adaptation, SCAS was used to measure the sociocultural adaptation of foreign students studying at the International Institute in Bangkok.

Related Studies

There are several studies that examine international students studying abroad facing many kinds of problems. Talebloo and Baki (2013) indicated that problems related to facilities, social environment, academic system, and international office programs are the main challenges faced by international postgraduate students during their first year of studies in University Putra Malaysia (UPM). Meanwhile, Titrek et al. (2016) studied the challenges faced by international students in Turkey. It is found that the major problem of overseas students was communication (speaking, grammar, reading, listening, and writing respectively), followed by accommodation, the environment, cultural aspects, health, and social interaction activities. Gu (2013) studied on cross-cultural adaptation of 42 Chinese students studying at Maejo

University, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. She selected the relevant items from Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) of Ward's original version that relate to social support, life change, and cultural distance which those factors could affect the cross-cultural adaptation of the participants. The study showed that most of Chinese students significantly had the adaptive problems on cultural distance. The problem on social support was a moderate problem. However, the least problem was life change of the Chinese students. Furthermore, the Thai and English language barrier was significantly affected the cross-cultural adaptation in term of social support and life change.

In addition, Yu and Wright (2015) conducted a study on sociocultural adaptation, academic adaptation and satisfaction of international higher degree research students in Australia. The results showed that the integration into the community, interacting with other students, relationships with supervisors were the most important issues for the students rather than the academic studies.

Veenunkarn Rujiprak (2016) did a research on cultural and psychological adjustment of international students in Thailand. The result found that international students have a moderately high psychological and cultural adjustment. Moreover, it is supported that the role of personal resources (social support and self efficacy) affects the cultural adjustment.

Methodology

This research was based on the quantitative and qualitative methods. Two instruments were used to collect the data: questionnaire and follow-up interview. The questionnaire was used to collect the data from the foreign students to find out participants' problems, their major problems, and their solutions. The interview was used to acquire the in-depth information from the participants and to triangulate the results from the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was adapted from the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) of Ward and Kennedy (1999) and Gu (2013). It was divided into two parts: demographic information and sociocultural adaptation. In the second part, it was modified by Gu (2013) which was divided into three parts: Social support (9 items), life change (10 items), and cultural distance (10 items). A five-point Likert rating scale (no difficulty to extremely difficulty) was used to rate the participants' degree of difficulty of the 29 items. Each part of the questionnaire ends with open-ended questions concerning problems and their solutions in cross-cultural adaptation in case of the participants had more suggestions.

The questionnaire and interview were done from August to September 2018 with



the international students in Bangkok. The researcher used convenience sampling criteria, 65 overseas students in 2017 academic year were selected to answer the questionnaires. All 65 questionnaires (100%) were completed and returned for data analysis using statistical techniques to acquire descriptive statistics. In part one, frequency and percentage were used to analyze the respondents' personal information. In part two, mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the respondents' perceptions of sociocultural challenges.

Interviews were used to triangulate the data from the questionnaire, and to find out in-depth information on how the interviewees dealt with the problems. The guideline questions were adapted from Gu (2013), asking the interviewees what problems they had, their main causes, and how they handled the problems. There were six key informants, who were chosen by using convenience sampling. The researcher took notes while interviewing, and the time duration for each interview was 10-15 minutes.

Results

Table 1

Problems of Foreign Students Studying in Bangkok

Factors	Mean	SD	Meaning
1. Social support	2.71	0.86	Moderate difficulty
2. Cultural distance	2.23	0.83	Slight difficulty
3. Life change	1.82	0.67	Slight difficulty
Overall Factors	2.25	0.79	Slight difficulty

Table 1 shows that the most problematic is social support factor, at a mean of 2.71, which is at a moderate level. The second and third problems are cultural distance and life change, respectively. The mean of cultural distance is 2.23, which is the level of a slight difficulty. The last factor is the adaptation on life change; its mean is 1.82, at a slight difficulty level. All factors regarding sociocultural adaptation are at a mean of 2.25, which is a slight level of difficulty.

Table 2

Sociocultural Adaptation Problems Regarding Social Support (n = 65)

Factors	Mean	SD	Meaning
1. Understanding the local political system	3.06	1.51	Moderate difficulty
2. Dealing with unsatisfactory service	3.05	1.24	Moderate difficulty
3. Dealing with bureaucracy	2.98	1.21	Moderate difficulty
4. Dealing with someone who is unpleasant	2.89	1.30	Moderate difficulty
5. Dealing with people in authority	2.85	1.24	Moderate difficulty
6. Dealing with people staring at you	2.60	1.31	Slight difficulty
7. Making friends with local Thai people	2.46	1.12	Slight difficulty
8. Communicating with people of a different ethnic group	2.35	1.18	Slight difficulty
9. Talking about yourself with others	2.17	1.22	Slight difficulty
Overall Social Support Factors	2.71	0.86	Moderate difficulty

Table 2 presents sociocultural adaptation problems pertaining to social support. The average score of social support is 2.71 which is rated at moderate difficulty. All of the items ($M = 2.17$ -3.06) are listed in descending order. The three highest average scores are (1) “understanding the local political system” ($M = 3.06$), (2) “dealing with unsatisfactory service” ($M = 3.05$), and (3) “dealing with bureaucracy” ($M = 2.98$). The item mentioning “talking about themselves with others” is rated the lowest at 2.17.



Table 3

Sociocultural Adaptation Problems Regarding Life Change (n = 65)

Descriptive Results	Mean	SD	Meaning
1. Dealing with the climate	2.28	1.22	Slight difficulty
2. Going to social gatherings	2.12	1.11	Slight difficulty
3. Getting used to the pace of life	1.85	1.03	Slight difficulty
4. Adapting to local accommodation	1.83	1.02	Slight difficulty
5. Using the transport system	1.82	1.12	Slight difficulty
6. Finding your way around	1.75	0.99	No difficulty
7. Finding food that you enjoy	1.74	1.05	No difficulty
8. Following rules and regulations	1.69	0.98	No difficulty
9. Being independent from your parents	1.63	0.99	No difficulty
10. Going shopping	1.49	0.89	No difficulty
Overall Life Change Factors	1.82	0.67	Slight difficulty

Table 3 shows that the average score of sociocultural adaptation concerning life change is 1.82, which is rated at slight difficulty. All of the items ($M = 1.49$ -2.28) are listed in descending order. The three highest average scores are (1) “dealing with the climate” ($M = 2.28$), (2) “going to social gatherings” ($M = 2.12$), and (3) “getting used to the pace of life” ($M = 1.85$). The least problematic is “going shopping” ($M = 1.49$).

Table 4

Sociocultural Adaptation Problems Regarding Cultural Distance (n = 65)

Descriptive Results	Mean	SD	Meaning
1. Making yourself understood	2.65	1.19	Moderate difficulty
2. Understanding jokes and humor	2.60	1.26	Slight difficulty
3. Seeing things from the local's point of view	2.45	1.15	Slight difficulty
4. Worshipping	2.32	1.46	Slight difficulty
5. Taking a local perspective on the culture	2.17	1.15	Slight difficulty
6. Understanding the local world view	2.14	1.09	Slight difficulty
7. Understanding the local value system	2.12	1.21	Slight difficulty
8. Understanding ethnic or cultural differences	2.09	1.16	Slight difficulty
9. Being able to see two sides of an intercultural issue	1.98	1.02	Slight difficulty
10. Relating to members of the opposite sex	1.80	0.94	No difficulty
Overall Cultural Distance Factors	2.23	0.83	Slight difficulty

Table 4 explains the sociocultural adaptation problem regarding cultural distance. Most of the participants (2.65 in mean) had slight difficulty with “making yourself understood”; a mean of 2.60 had a little problem with “understanding jokes and humor”; and a mean of 2.45 felt that “seeing things from the local’s point of view” was not a big problem for them. However, a minority of participants had not had problems “relating to members of the opposite sex,” at a mean of 1.80. Likewise, the average cross-cultural adaptation problem on cultural distance is at a mean of 2.23, the level of a slight difficulty.



Discussion

Based on three factors affecting sociocultural adaptation problems encountered by foreign students studying in Bangkok – social support, life change, and cultural distance – the findings reveal that social support is the most problematic for foreign students' sociocultural adaptation problems, especially understanding the local political system. Thai political system is more complex than what they were used to. The migration policy changes frequently, so it caused some of the participants to adjust themselves all the time. The participants stated that, in that situation, it was good to stay calm, tried to be patient, and accepted what happened. Opening their minds and seeking advice from peers as to what should or should not be done is recommended. Besides, thinking positive keeps them interested in finding out about other cultures. The easy way is to just comply with the local culture and adjust themselves.

The second sociocultural adaptation problem is cultural distance, particularly making yourself understood. It is difficult for participants' adaptation, as often they do not know what is happening around them. The main point is that they did not understand local language and it was difficult to understand new things around them. Therefore, the participants positively thought that they should let it go and be happy. Lastly, spending more time with the locals and soaking up Thai culture were good advices to deal with the problem.

The least difficult sociocultural adaptation problem is life change, especially dealing with the climate. It was very difficult to deal with climate, especially during the summer. Sometimes flooding caused them a problem as well, because they could not go to work or to university classes. They cannot change the climate so it is a good way to accept the circumstance. These findings go together with Wu et al. (2015), who found that overseas students studying abroad may be faced with problems in social aspects. Regarding the other two difficulties, the problems with cultural distance and life change are at the slight levels. Additionally, the findings also go in line of Gu (2013) that Chinese students studying in Thailand had sociocultural adaptation in three main areas, namely cultural distance, social support, and life change in descending order.

In addition, the findings from the interviews indicate that the language barrier and face saving are the main problems for the informants. Some participants suggest having interpersonal skills and communication skills to overcome the challenges. The information

learned from the interviews is that the major problem in social support is the language barrier. The first way of problem-solving is using Google Translate, body language, and gestures to make Thais understand them better. In some cases, the informants phoned their Thai friends to ask for more assistance. Learning the Thai language is another way recommended by some informants for coping with the language barrier. In addition, another issue for the interviewees is face saving; the participants try to gradually comply with the Thai value and accept over time. The result is in accordance with Titrek et al. (2016); the major problem of overseas students is communication followed by accommodation, the environment, cultural aspects, health, and social interaction activities. With reference to how the participants deal with problem, they used positive thinking and similar methods to cope with the issues. In summary, those issues are not massive challenges that would cause the foreign students to be unhappy while studying in Thailand.

Conclusion and Suggestions

From the research, it is found that foreign students studying in Bangkok faced problems in three aspects: social support, cultural distance, and life change respectively. The major problem is social support, especially “understanding the local political system.” It was rated at a moderate level. The second problem is cultural distance, particularly “making yourself understood” which is rated at a slight level. The minor problem is life change, especially “dealing with the climate”, which is rated at a slight level as well as cultural distance.

As for the problem with social support, the participants have coped with the issues by trying to become more familiar with those situations, understanding the Thai system, and accepting the way things are. The solutions to cultural distance are to observe and take a look at the two sides of the story and to try to understand the Thai view. In addition, spending more time with the local people and soaking in the local way of life is one solution. The last one is to speak and communicate with locals and to imitate others help them to get over the issues, as well. Finally, the adaptation to cross-cultural problems in terms of life change is mentioned. To deal with the climate, they bought suitable health products (sunscreen, etc.) or staying in air conditioner places. In case of going to social gatherings, the participants settled this matter by complying with the local situation and adjusting themselves to the situations.



Finally, it is suggested that a study with a larger number of participants and from many international institutes would make it possible to generalize the study's results. Researching the relative factors contributing to cross-cultural problems is another possible topic. As the language barrier is the major problem between Thais and foreigners, it would be useful to study the possible factors affecting language barrier problems, which would benefit not only international students but also the teachers and staff in their institutions, and it could lead to improvements in the communicative ability of Thailand's population in the future.

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