

Culture Shock as the Learning Outcome of Intercultural Communication among International Students in the Host Culture

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Abstract

When students across the world have many opportunities to study abroad due to the trend toward internationalization and globalization in the 21st century, they may get various experiences from total immersion of the host culture. This study aims at international students speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) and coming from Southeast Asian countries to study at a university in Taiwan where Chinese is the target language. The study explores whether and how these students can experience culture shock, which arises from intercultural communication during studying abroad through qualitative research. As it is found that international students speaking either English or Chinese as a shared language in the process of intercultural communication indeed feel the emergence of culture shock displayed in their attitudes, it can thus be concluded that regardless of which language is adopted by international students, culture shock emerges as one of the learning outcomes of intercultural communication during studying abroad. While finding that culture shock can be a type of transition shock in one context but can become a kind of intercultural sensitivity in another, it is also concluded that culture shock may vary with both the frequency of intercultural communication and different contexts. As the results of the study also show that culture shock may be transformed into worldviews or cultural awareness among international students, it is further concluded that its emergence may reflect other learning outcomes of intercultural communication in the host culture and benefit international students in developing certain levels of competence to respond to world affairs in the global society of the 21st century.

Keywords: EFL, culture shock, internalization, intercultural communication, international student

1. Introduction

With the trend toward internationalization and globalization in the 21st century, more and more universities across the world are promoting internationalization in higher education through establishing study-abroad or work-abroad programs within recent decades. Students in the 21st century indeed have many opportunities to communicate and interact with those who come from different countries. According to Knight (2022), the development of internationalization in higher education consists of the integration of international and intercultural dimensions in education. International education involves academic exchanges of scholars and students (Marshall, 2024), and intercultural education enables students to learn to be able to cross cultural and linguistic barriers and understand more about themselves and people from different countries (Houghton, 2013; Lee, 2024). Under these circumstances, the increase in the number of international students makes it possible to create an atmosphere of internationalization in higher education and to lead to the development of intercultural education. For example, studies have found that study-abroad programs have become global phenomena and offer more opportunities of intercultural communication, which helps students studying abroad learn to overcome problems in both the adaptation to the host culture and second or foreign language (EFL/ESL) acquisition (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). In response to internationalization in higher education, the number of international students in universities in the United States is continually in progress for the sake of promoting global activities within recent decades (OECD, 2021). Taking the situation of Taiwan's universities as another example, the number of international students has increased year by year and reached 126,997 (with a rate of 4.6%) in 2020 due to the low birth rate in the society (Lin, 2020). Different from other countries, international students in Taiwan mostly come from Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia and speak English as a foreign language (EFL). These students have created a special scene of internationalization for universities in Taiwan within recent years.

Although international students studying abroad may benefit from various experiences of total immersion in the host culture, studies show that they may face problems arising from cultural differences and thus experience culture shock from encounters with native speakers and the target culture (Furnham, 2025). To this point, the question concerning whether and how it affects international students coming from Southeast Asian countries and studying abroad in Taiwan where English is spoken as an international language and Chinese as the target language deserves the attention of educators and researchers across the world. Given that international students have studied abroad and adopted either Chinese or English as a shared language inside or outside the classroom, it would be interesting to know whether they would experience culture shock from communication and interactions with native speakers in the host culture. While targeting international students coming from Southeast Asian countries and speaking either English or Chinese as a shared language in Taiwan, this study explores whether and how culture shock could merge and vary with the frequency of intercultural communication in total immersion of the host culture by drawing upon qualitative research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture Shock and Intercultural Communication

When culture shock is associated with intercultural communication among international students studying abroad, such an encounter with the host culture can be viewed as a kind of intercultural training, which may develop intercultural communicative skills (Landis, 2020; Gube, 2023). From the perspective of adaptation to a new environment, culture shock by nature belongs to a psychological phenomenon that is often experienced by those who are immersed in the host culture (Dervin, 2024). In other words, such a psychological adaptation strategy is usually to help one understand their growth in total immersion of the host culture. For example, Choi (2023) maintains that culture shock may be considered as a type of intercultural sensitivity that reflects learners' perceived needs and is useful for enhancing the efficiency of intercultural communication. However, studies have also found that culture shock may be the greatest at the first entry into a new environment but can be overcome by learners themselves during studying abroad (Ward et al., 2020). Indeed, it is necessary for international students immersed in the host culture to cross cultural boundaries and create new social relationships with people from different cultures by which success in intercultural communication may be achieved efficiently (Elias & Mansouri, 2023). The more international students studying abroad have experiences in intercultural communication, the more understandings of the target culture and the language adopted by native speakers they may have.

2.2 Functions of Culture Shock

Even though culture shock indeed emerges in the process of intercultural communication for students, it seems to function either positively or negatively among those who are immersed in the host culture in their adaptation to a new environment. For example, studies have shown that culture shock is positively considered to be part of both the routine process of the adaptation to cultural stress and the manifestation of a desire for a more predictable, stable, and understandable environment (Mustafa, 2023). Such intercultural sensitivity may, on the one hand, enable learners to know how to cope with the change in a new environment and lead to sociocultural adaptation (Ward et al., 2020). On the other hand, one may learn to have critical perspectives on cultural differences in total immersion of the host culture and benefit from this by developing a certain level of competence for communication and interaction with people from different cultures (Kim, 2023). However, studies have also found that culture shock is negatively interpreted as the symptoms arising from failure and psychological problems that call for specific treatments or counseling services (Furnham, 2025). According to Kim (2023), culture shock can often be associated with general "transition shock," which refers to a natural consequence of relocation whereby one is unable to interact with native speakers or deal with what is encountered in a new environment effectively. As studies show that culture shock is also linked to second or foreign language acquisition (Wang, 2023), it may affect sociocultural adaptation to a new environment in total immersion of the host culture among international students. Overall, culture shock reflects an outcome that those who are immersed in the host culture may experience but can be overcome eventually by students themselves because of understanding more about the target culture and native speakers.

2.3 Culture Shock Shown in One's Attitudes

In exploring how culture shock occurs from the experiences of intercultural communication, attitudes can be considered to play a role in reflecting one's psychological phenomena caused by the encounter with the hosts and help to understand the variation of such a learning outcome. For instance, studies have found that culture shock can be identified as a function in the input and output of social action from one's attitudes (Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2023). Positive attitudes toward the hosts and the learning of the target language are obviously held by international students under the influence of intercultural contacts with the target culture (Mustafa, 2023). According to Byram (2021),

those who are immersed in the host culture usually adjust their attitudes to be positive for developing intercultural communicative competence from discovering, comparing, and interpreting the differences between one culture and another in the meaning-negotiation process. Studies have also shown that socially-constructed attitudes are often connected to social and ethnic identities and determine what those who are in the host culture learn and how they communicate and interact with native speakers (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2023). However, Oppenheim (2020) maintained that attitudes consist of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components and may directly or indirectly reflect one's stereotypes, beliefs, reactions, or verbal statements during encounters with the other culture. Studies have further found that attitudes are complex and may not be stable to correspond with what people think in some situations (Perloff, 2020); thus, how students studying abroad demonstrate culture shock in their attitudes may deserve further attention in this study.

3. Methodology

As a result of internationalization in higher education, this study aimed at international students coming from Southeast Asian countries and studying abroad at a university in Taiwan. The study explored whether culture shock would emerge among these students and how it would vary with the frequency of intercultural communication in total immersion of the host culture by drawing upon focus group interviews. Culture shock was first hypothesized to emerge among international students studying abroad and speaking either English or Chinese as a shared language. Second, it was assumed that culture shock would be shown in one's attitudes, which responded to three contexts (i.e., making friends with native speakers, facing the target culture, and using the target language in daily life). Finally, the degree to which international students studying abroad undertook intercultural communication was hypothesized to be the key factor in predicting the extent to which culture shock varied among these students studying abroad in the host culture. The more international students get involved in intercultural communication in different contexts, the less culture shock is expected to be displayed in their attitudes.

3.1 Research Questions

The following three questions are explored in this study:

- (1) How likely can culture shock be performed in the attitudes of international students studying abroad and speaking either English or Chinese as a shared language?
- (2) What is the role of the frequency of intercultural communication for international students in the first-year immersion of the host culture?
- (3) How does culture shock affect international students who are in total immersion of the host culture?

3.2 Participants Recruited for the Study

Twelve international students studying at a university in Taiwan were recruited as participants for the focus group interviews of this study. They came from different Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia. All the participants were undergraduate students with the major of foreign languages in the first year of studying abroad. Because of the chosen major, there were more female participants than male participants. In addition, they were in their twenties and had no experience of living with host families in a foreign country. Because participants studied abroad in Taiwan, where Chinese was spoken as the target language and English as an international language, they were offered a basic conversation course of the target language upon arrival at the university. While the frequency of intercultural communication was hypothesized to play a role in predicting the extent to which culture shock emerged, participants were divided into three groups according to the frequency of their communication and interaction with native speakers. Four participants with the higher frequency of communication and interaction with native speakers inside or outside the classroom were placed into Group A, four participants with the middle frequency were placed into Group B, and the remaining four participants who had the lower frequency were placed into Group C.

3.3 Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the fact that there were few participants recruited for qualitative research because of the uneasiness of recruiting international students to study abroad in Taiwan. In addition, the other limitation of the study came from the situation that participants might have the desire for adopting English instead of Chinese as a shared language for intercultural communication in the first year of studying abroad. These two situations could make the findings of the study not meet expectations.

3.4 Instruments and Procedures

This study adopted focus group interviews, which consisted of semi-structured questions and were conducted at a university in Taiwan. The interviews with participants who would like to share their experiences had to be conducted at least three times because of students' class schedules. Each interview lasted for more than 2 hours for the concern of clear discussions. Although participants in this study came from different Southeast Asian countries, they all agreed to speak English as a shared language during interviews. The raw data were recorded by the researcher with the permission of participants. As studies have found that thematic analysis is an effective approach to conducting data analysis of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2023), all the raw data of this study were subjected to thematic analysis in which the researcher coded, categorized, and connected the data via the process of comparison. Under themes that referred to three contexts (i.e., making friends with native speakers, facing the target culture, and using the target language in daily life), all the keywords of the raw data were highlighted and analyzed to explain whether and how culture shock occurred and varied among the participants in the three groups in the process of intercultural communication.

4. Results

To render the results of this study clearly, the raw data that symbolized culture shock in the process of intercultural communication were highlighted and analysed as follows:

4.1 Theme 1: The Context of Making Friends with Native Speakers

When asked about whether it was easy to make friends with native speakers, participants who had the lower frequency of intercultural communication inside or outside the classroom in Group C tended to demonstrate culture shock in the affective and cognitive components of attitudes. For instance, they felt "pressure," "unfamiliarity," "language problems," "inability to understand native speakers," and "cultural differences" in the context of making friends with native speakers. The following excerpts from the participants in Group C indicated that either cultural and language barriers or psychological bottlenecks could be the origins of their culture shock. Such messages also shed light on the situation that culture shock, which was demonstrated in participants' negative attitudes, symbolized their inability to adapt to the host culture and might negatively affect both their psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation:

C2: *I think that people in Taiwan are friendly to me, but they like to ignore me in a group and make me unable to understand what they think.*

C1: *I consider making friends with native speakers as a kind of pressure because of the lack of understanding their personality.*

C3: *It is a problem for me to make friends with native speakers. They like to speak their own language fast and expect me to respond to them in the same way. I do not like to do the way they do.*

C4: *I am unfamiliar with using their language, so I think it is better for me to speak English to them.*

While sharing the experiences of making friends with native speakers inside or outside the classroom, participants in both Group A and Group B were also found to show culture shock in the cognitive component of attitudes toward the context of making friends with native speakers. For instance, they commonly responded that making friends with native speakers was difficult due to the cognition of "ethnic backgrounds," "social groups," "cultural differences," "no shared topic," and "lacking shared feelings." It was also found that those who had a higher and middle frequency of intercultural communication in Group A and Group B of this study tended to consider making friends with native speakers as a real problem insofar as they could simply achieve superficial social relationships with them but were unable to speak Chinese well to go beyond a certain level of friendship in becoming "real friends" of native speakers. The following excerpts shed light on the situation that culture shock was obviously shown in the attitudes toward the context of making friends with native speakers and might arise from the uncomfortable experience of interaction with native speakers, which seemed to negatively influence participants in their sociocultural adaptation. More importantly, such messages underscored that this type of culture shock did not easily decrease with the frequency of intercultural communication in either Group B or Group A:

A1: *I may have problems with making friends with them because of topics or cultural differences.*

A4: *I don't know what can be talked to them. I cannot speak Chinese well.*

A3: *People in Taiwan have different social groups, so I cannot make friends with them.*

A2: *I can get along with some of people in Taiwan, but it seems difficult for me to take them as real friends because*

of different cultural backgrounds.

B4: I guess they do not like to make friends with me because I speak poor Chinese and English.

B2: It is easy for me to know native speakers and make friends with them. But it is hard to make the friendship deep to the real friends.

B3: I don't think people in Taiwan can become my good friends. They cannot share what I feel by using either their language or the English language well.

B1: I can't find any topic that can be shared with people in Taiwan because of cultural differences.

4.2 Theme 2: The Context of Facing the Target Culture

With respect to the attitudes toward the context of facing the target culture, those who had a lower and middle frequency of intercultural communication with native speakers inside or outside the classroom in both Group B and Group C were found to commonly demonstrate culture shock in the behavioral component of attitudes such as “being not involved in the target culture” or in the affective components such as “feeling uneasy” or “feeling difficult” in the attitudes toward the context of facing the target culture. This implied that participants having little knowledge of the target culture and hardly possessing experiences in intercultural communication inside or outside the classroom might experience culture shock due to lacking knowledge of the target culture. In addition, it was found that participants in both Group B and Group C tended to demonstrate culture shock in their superficial cognition of the target culture with such concepts as “gossip,” “obedience,” and “dependence” or with the common sense of lifestyles like “drinking bobo tea,” “working late,” “being not on time,” “paying no attention to the learning,” and “treating others.” This indicated that attitudes toward the context of facing the target culture shown among them were neither positive nor negative. However, such messages implied that culture shock in the context of facing the target culture might be helpful to the change in their thinking modes and the development of worldviews.

B1: I am not really involved in the culture in Taiwan. I guess gossip is part of the culture.

B3: It is hard for me to understand the culture in Taiwan. Working late can be a kind of the culture in Taiwan. Native speakers are usually hard-working and work late in daily life.

B4: I don't know their culture either. I think they may pay no attention to their learning.

B2: I think the culture in Taiwan can be seen from the lifestyles such as drinking bobo tea often. However, it is uneasy to understand this culture.

C3: I think obedience is a kind of culture in Taiwan. For example, young people like to obey their parents and care others' impression.

C4: I think people in Taiwan do not understand the importance of being on time.

C2: I find that people in this culture are dependent on group members and unconfident of themselves.

C1: When my classmate in Taiwan invited me to eat in a coffee shop, I was shocked to see him treat me for my coffee.

In contrast, it was found that culture shock was hardly shown in the negative attitudes toward the context of facing the target culture among participants with higher frequency of intercultural communication in Group A of this study. For example, they tended to feel quite “positive” or “learnable” about Taiwanese culture due to an awareness of the target culture, which was full of strengths such as “enthusiasm,” “politeness,” “friendliness,” “efforts,” “helpfulness,” “responsibility,” “cooperation,” “devotion,” or “problem-solving ability.” Participants in Group A were also found to “appreciate the strengths” of the target culture or “understand their own culture,” which meant they might adjust their attitudes toward the context of facing the target culture to be positive during studying abroad. The following excerpts shed light on the fact that those with higher frequency of intercultural communication might transform their culture shock into other forms of worldviews and cultural awareness and also acquire both their psychological and social adaptation from the understanding of the target culture while studying abroad:

A3: I start to find how many differences there are in different countries. While being here in a different culture, I also know my own culture.

A1: the culture in Taiwan. is full of enthusiasm, helpfulness, and cooperation. I appreciate its strengths.

A4: I think their culture includes friendliness and devotion.

A2: the culture in Taiwan. is hard-working, responsible, and polite to others. I enjoy learning its strengths.

4.3 Theme 3: The Context of Using the Target Language in Daily Life

When asked about the experience of using the target language in daily life, participants studying abroad with a lower frequency of intercultural communication in Group C were found to commonly demonstrate culture shock in either the cognitive or affective component of attitudes. For example, they tended to show culture shock in both the cognition of “speaking poor Chinese” and the affection of “feeling afraid of sharing.” More importantly, it was also found that culture shock reflected in the attitudes toward the context of using the target language in daily life was displayed in behavioral components such as “being quiet and avoiding it,” “the need for practicing English,” or “having a hard time in understanding the messages of native speakers” among participants who were in Group C. This indicated that those who hardly adopted the target language in daily life might have problems in speaking or writing Chinese inside and outside the classroom and thus experience culture shock. The responses of participants in Group C in the following excerpts revealed that culture shock in the context using the target language daily might not be easily overcome in a short time. More importantly, such messages shed light on the situation that culture shock in the context of using the target language in daily life was caused by their language barriers, stereotypes of practicing English, and psychological bottlenecks:

C2: *I have hard time when I speak poor Chinese to them because they speak so fast that I cannot understand what they say.*

C3: *But I feel scared to talk to people in Taiwan by using the Chinese language. I don't like to communicate with native speakers.*

C4: *I do not like to speak Chinese in daily life because I have the need for practicing my English.*

C1: *When people in Taiwan are around me, I am always quiet and try to avoid talking to them.*

Compared to those with a lower frequency of intercultural communication in Group C, the participants with a middle frequency of intercultural communication in Group B might not take using the target language in daily life for granted but show culture shock in either the affective or cognitive component of attitudes. For example, they were found to commonly demonstrate culture shock in the cognitive components of “cultural differences,” “preference in speaking English,” or “conscious inferiority” as well as the affective components such as “feeling uncomfortable.” The following excerpts revealed that this type of culture shock might influence participants with a middle frequency of intercultural communication in Group B due to their sociocultural adaptation:

B3: *In using the target language in daily life, I find there are cultural differences.*

B4: *I prefer speaking English to Taiwanese people, but they don't like to speak English to me in daily life.*

B2: *I think culture and lifestyles are the main problems. I prefer speaking English but feel inferior about using their language to talk to them in daily life.*

B1: *To use the Chinese language in daily life is uncomfortable even though I know how to use it sometimes.*

According to the findings, participants in Group A had much more confidence in using the target language in daily life than those in Group B and Group C. For instance, they commonly considered using the target language in daily life “enjoyable,” “easy,” “learnable,” or “comfortable.” The following excerpts indicated that participants with a higher frequency of intercultural communication in Group A seemed to enjoy using the target language in daily life and in turn to overcome culture shock from the experiences of intercultural communication. Such messages also implied that participants in Group A might overcome culture shock through adjusting their attitudes toward the context of using the target language in daily life to be positive and can further develop cultural awareness and worldviews under the influence of intercultural communication:

A3: *My Chinese has been improved a lot. Now I feel comfortable with using the Chinese language in daily life.*

A4: *I can learn another language if I adopt Chinese to talk to people in daily life.*

A1: *I enjoy using the Chinese language in daily life because I can learn a lot of local things from it.*

A2: *I feel it easy to use the Chinese language in daily life because people in Taiwan speak and write standard Chinese. I also learn the Chinese language from using it in daily life.*

5. Discussions & Implications

An overview of the results concerning this study shows that culture shock can be manifested in the attitudes among international students due to communication and interaction with native speakers studying abroad. It is also found that the degree to which culture shock decreases among these students studying abroad may depend not only on the

frequency of intercultural communication but also on its contexts. For example, the results of this study find that international students in different groups tend to be shocked at the characteristics of native speakers and show culture shock in their negative attitudes toward the context of making friends with native speakers. It can thus be argued that this kind of culture shock reflected in the context of making friends with native speakers may symbolize the inability to psychologically and socially adapt to the host culture. It is also maintained that international students studying abroad have to learn how to adjust their attitudes in the context of making friends with native speakers to be positive from enhancing the knowledge and skills of communication and interaction with native speakers. In addition, it is emphasized that this type of culture shock can be considered as a kind of intercultural sensitivity for making friends with native speakers and may not be easily released without more active and direct contact with native speakers. It is further maintained that living in a host family in the early stage of immersion into the host culture may be useful to promoting mutual understanding between native speakers and international students and facilitating the adaptation to the host culture while studying abroad.

As the results of this study show that culture shock is commonly reflected in neutral attitudes toward the context of facing the target culture due to the superficial cognition of the target culture among those with a lower and middle frequency of intercultural communication Group B and Group C, it can thus be argued that culture shock reflected in the context of facing the target culture may function as a kind of transition shock that enables international students studying abroad for a short time to make a change in their thinking modes and lead to the development of worldviews. International students who have a higher frequency of intercultural communication in Group A are found to possess more knowledge of both the target culture and their own cultures and to appreciate the strengths of the target culture; because of this, it is argued that culture shock in the context of facing the target culture among those who have a higher frequency of intercultural communication is likely to be transformed into the other form of either cultural awareness or worldviews because of their deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the target culture.

While exploring whether and how culture shock is shown in one's attitudes toward the context of using the target language in daily life, the results of this study find that culture shock reflected in the attitudes of Group B and Group C seems not to decrease with any frequency of intercultural communication. It can thus be argued that culture shock in the context of using the target language in daily life may be considered as a kind of transition shock in the adaptation to the target language due to the lack of understanding the target language and the stereotypes of speaking English as a shared language as well as psychological bottlenecks in the early stage of total immersion in the host culture. To this point, it is also argued that international students' linguistic barriers and stereotypes during studying abroad are unavoidable but can be gradually overcome by themselves through both the self-improvement of communication and interpersonal skills and the progress in proficiency of the target language. Different from culture shock in the context of making friends with native speakers, this kind of culture shock may be too complex to be easily overcome because it still depends on Chinese learning motivation among international students studying abroad in Taiwan.

6. Conclusion

Internationalization of higher education is leading to an increase in study-abroad programs among universities across the world in the global society of the 21st century. Indeed, this offers students many opportunities to study abroad. Under these circumstances, it seems unavoidable for international students studying abroad to be affected by encounters with the target culture and native speakers in the host culture. When it is found that international students indeed feel the emergence of culture shock in the process of intercultural communication during studying abroad, it can thus be concluded that culture shock emerges as one of learning outcomes of intercultural communication in the host culture. As the results of the study show that culture shock may be a type of transition shock in one context but can become a kind of intercultural sensitivity in another, it is also concluded that culture shock may vary with the frequency of intercultural communication and different contexts. More importantly, the results of the study also show that culture shock can be gradually transformed into the other form of cultural awareness or worldviews. In response to this finding, it can be concluded that culture shock plays a role in enabling international students to make a change in their thinking modes and is beneficial for gaining other learning outcomes of intercultural communication. Regardless of which language is adopted by international students as a shared language for communication and interaction with native speakers during studying abroad, it is suggested that those who study abroad across the world should be alert to the emergence of culture shock during studying abroad and learn to overcome it through intercultural communication, which may further help them develop certain levels of competence to respond to world affairs in the global society of the 21st century.

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