Experiences of Six Asian International Graduate Students in Online Courses

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Abstract

This study explored online experiences of six Asian international graduate students in the United States (U.S.). The qualitative research study used a narrative analysis approach that collected data from semi-structured interviews. Three major themes emerged: (1) classroom differences, (2) positive attitude toward online courses and (3) sociocultural experiences in online courses. The key findings were: a) participants shared differences between their teacher centered instructional delivery in their home county to student centered instructional delivery in the U.S.; b) most participants had positive experiences in online classes when it comes to flexibility and convenience, but wanted more opportunities to interact directly with instructors and classmates; and c) participants felt a sense of belonging when there were inclusiveness from professors and classmates.

Keywords: Academic Experience, Social Cultural Experience, Asian Students, Online Courses

Introduction

There were more than one million international students in the United States (U.S.) between 2016 and 2017. The top three places of origin of international students were China; 350,755, India; 186,267, and South Korea; 61,007 (Institute of International Education; IIE, 2017). These numbers reflect a significant increase in cultural and linguistic diversity in U.S. higher education (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Previous research studies on Asian international students have explored mainly their social and emotional adaptation (Lee & Ciftci, 2014; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015), challenges (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015), stress (Liao & Wei, 2014; Yan & Berliner, 2013), and their academic experiences (Lowinger, He, Lin, & Chang, 2014).

With increasing technology usage, the Internet has become a widely used tool to develop "a wider learning context" (Chang et al., 2014). According to Kena and his colleagues (2016), nearly one out of four undergraduate students took distance education courses, while 2.1 million students or 12% of total undergraduate students were enrolled only in distance education courses. In addition, one out of three post-baccalaureate students participated in distance education, while 25% of total post-baccalaureate students were enrolled exclusively in distance education courses. However, in the case of Asian international students, 26% of undergraduate Asian students were taking online classes and 19.4% of Asian graduate students have participated in distance education (Snyder, Brey, & Dillow, 2016).

Such changes in technology and course delivery have prompted the need to say that the internet has become "a must" in education (Sweeney & Ingram, 2001) and technology is becoming an integral part of the learning process in the modern world (Aikina & Zubkova, 2015). The technology removes geographical barriers, thus increasing broader participation form global communities in online learning environments (Treuhaft, 2000; Kocabas, Ozfidan, & Burlbaw, 2018). With geographical barriers changing many students from various countries and backgrounds are gathered in online education settings. This suggests that there will be an increase in cultural differences between students and professors and among students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For example, a number of international students in American universities, who usually have a lack of understanding of the American society and

cultures, often experience being marginalized in the online discussion (Jun & Park, 2003). "In this case, cultural discontinuities occur when the schemata of a learner and instructional designer do not correspond" (Wilson, 2001, p.54). Craig and his colleagues (2012) noted that: "Although some researchers have found that there are differences in the use of synchronous tools which are dependent on factors such as culture, others have found that using such tools may cut through potential barriers" (p. 8). Therefore, if students and instructors in online classes ignore cultural gaps, it may bring about educational and psychological consequences, that prevent students from developing their academic potential (Kang & Chang, 2016). Consequently, cyberspace needs to consider a culture in order to communicate people from different cultures since online environment is not a "neutral or value-free platform for communications" (Rovai, 2007). As cultural gaps increase, there are more opportunities to misunderstand people from different backgrounds (Rovai, 2007). Therefore, cultural sensitivity strategies are needed in online learning environments when global villagers have different backgrounds, ethnicities and learning styles (Treuhaft, 2000).

Many Asian international students are usually silent and do not participate in the class and activities when compared to American students. Often times, Asian students are reluctant to express their opinion because they are afraid of losing their face. Face, which is connected to Asian culture, refers to the embodiment of pride, dignity, honor and self-esteem (Lee, 2011). According to Choi (2015), no matter their level of English proficiency, many Asian students keep silent in the class because they are concerned about losing face despite their level of language fluency. Jun and Park (2003) supported the premise in their research that the language barrier was Asian students' main reason for losing face about speaking out in the classroom(also see Ozfidan, 2017).

Wilson's (2001) explanation about sociocultural characteristics of an Asian learning style helps to understand Asian students in American classes. According to Wilson, "For Hong Kong Chinese, their Confucian heritage was the most obvious example of ethnic culture. It was manifested in a number of ways, especially students' deference to teachers, unquestioning acceptance of grades, reluctance to express opinions, and their motivation to learn because they thought they should, rather than because of an intrinsic desire for knowledge" (p. 54). In addition, in the Asian education setting, asking questions and high oral participation during class time are

considered to be disobedient and disrespectful behaviors as well as challenging the authority of the teachers (Choi, 2015). A good student in Asia means that they are sitting and listening to teachers and memorize what they learn from teacher (Choi, 2015). Based on their educational background, most Asian students are unwilling to speak up in the American classroom. Therefore, online learning environments should adhere to the sociocultural needs of diverse students and address potential sociocultural obstacles while encouraging students to bring more than one cultural viewpoint to the online groups (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Despite the growing evidence of studying sociocultural context in online learning of Asian international students, many of those studies do not access the voices of Asian international students to inquire about their learning experiences in online classes. Many previous research studies focused on the technical component of distance education courses (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001). Often, there is a common belief that graduate level students have different experiences when compared to undergraduates (Chapell et al, 2005). As such, this study seeks to provide insights from the voices of six Asian international graduate students of about their academic and sociocultural experiences in online classes at one American university. The questions addressed in this study were:

1. What are academic experiences of Asian international graduate students in online courses?

2. What are sociocultural experiences of Asian international graduate students encounter when taking online courses?

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a case study design involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Case study is useful when it comes to understanding holistic view of the situation, phenomenon, group, or community (Kumar, 2011). Before collecting data, approval was received from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). A pilot study was conducted to assess the appropriateness of the interview questions and study design. A female Taiwanese master's degree student in education at the university participated in the pilot study. After completing the

pilot study, questions were modified and the order of the interview questions was changed for clarity. Before each interview was conducted, an information sheet with explanations about the purpose of the study, criteria for participants, research procedures and participant protections was distributed to participants. Face-to-face and one-on-one interviews were held on the university's campus and one participant was not available for face-to-face meeting and was interviewed via video chatting online. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. In this study, all the interviews were basically conducted in English. However, the researcher allowed participants to share their experiences in their language that made them feel more comfortable. The researcher considered their opinions and recorded their responses in their mother language to avoid bias and misinterpretation of their responses. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers. In this case, their responses were first transcribed in their native language, then in English with a third person who could speak both their mother language and English well. In the interview, the participants were asked about their perspectives toward face-to-face classes in university, their views on online courses in their motherlands, and their experiences in online programs in the U.S.

Participants

Purposeful sampling procedure was employed to recruit participants, which allows researchers to look for suitable participants. The selection criteria for participants included being an Asian graduate student and students who have taken at least one online courses in master or doctoral program in the U.S. As a result, a total six full-time graduate students, including four Chinese students, one Korean student, and one Taiwanese student participated in the study. Half of them were in master programs and the other half were doctoral students. The demographic information is listed in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used in this study to protect their confidentiality.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Participants*

Participants	Ethnicity (Asian)	Gender	Degree Level	Major	Length (in year)	The Number of Taking Online Courses
Ellie	Chinese	Female	Ph. D.	ESL	4	2
July	Korean	Female	Master's	ESL	14	12
Rucy	Chinese	Female	Master's	Reading and literacy	2	1
Sam	Taiwanese	Male	Ph. D.	Curriculum & Instruction	6	1
William	Chinese	Male	Master's	ESL	2	2
Xia	Chinese	Female	Ph. D.	Curriculum & Instruction	3	1

Data Analysis

This study followed Creswell (2014)'s six-step analysis procedures. All audio recordings of the interview were transcribed. Before collected data were analyzed, process of condensation was conducted in order to use analytic process effectively (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). In this pre-step, trivial data that were unrelated the research questions were deleted and important data were focused (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). The first step of data analysis was to reflect overall meaning of the information (Creswell, 2014). Then, the information underwent "a systemic process of analyzing textual data", which was called a coding process (Creswell, 2014). In the transcription stage and the coding process, phenomena and patterns were identified, and key words and sentences were collected and highlighted. After the coding process, the researchers generated and identified several themes using their description of data. Next step was to "advance how the description and themes will be represented" in the data (Creswell, 2014). The description and themes were divided into several categories in order to obtain meaningful data and cross-case findings (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, member-checking process was conducted by sharing transcripts and findings with interviewees. In the forthcoming section, we will explore the themes related to the two research questions.

Results

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the data. They were: (1) classroom differences, (2) positive attitude toward online courses, and (3) sociocultural experiences in online courses.

Classroom Differences

The participants shared differences between classes in the U.S. and their motherlands. Over half of the participants agreed that most U.S. classrooms were student-centered, with lots of discussions among students, while majority of Asian classrooms were teacher-centered in which teachers were giving lectures. For example, William stated: "American classroom had a really different classroom atmosphere compared to a Chinese classroom. American classroom is not teacher-centered class but more like student-centered." Ellie shared a similar viewpoint when she said:

> When I firstly came here, what I found was that courses in America were very different from China. In America, I found out that there were lots of discussion and much less lectures. In China, I remembered students barely talked in the class and almost 80% of classes were lectures from professors.

Rucy mentioned, "Even though it was online course, professors still required us to have a lot of online discussions." In this study, most participants shared that high levels of participation was expected not only in face-to face, but also in online courses. This style of course delivery was different from what they experienced in their motherlands.

Positive Attitude toward Online Courses

Most participants said that they had positive experiences in their online courses. Rucy shared her experience. "I think it [my view on online learning] is positive. Online experience in America is a new experience for me and more academic and systematic compared to China. It makes me learn how online courses work in American context." Ellie also shared positive aspects of her online class when she said:

Once class is over, every material in the physical classroom is gone unless I can record it. For online courses, even though I know that I cannot download voice threads, I can watch again and review whenever I want… In online education, time and location are more flexible. In face-to-face classroom, I have to have specific time to take part in the physical classroom [while online class is not].

As Ellie mentioned, and all of the participants agreed that online learning was convenient and flexible in terms of time and location. July mentioned:

In online setting, I can take all the time that I want before I reply to the comments to the classmates (in discussion posts). Especially for English as a second language speaker like me, coming up with classmates' response is really important…, thinking of better words, better phrases… Even if I come back to my hometown, I can still take online courses at my comfort in my free time. I can also work. I only need my laptop to learn everything. Online education is flexible.

One of Chinese student, Xia also said,

In face-to-face classes, there are a lot of discussions which are not useful for me. I think that is a waste of my time. But for the online course, I don't need to sit in the classroom for the whole class hours. I have a more flexible schedule in online learning. I can read the materials and watch the video [while classmates had discussions that were not useful for me].

William expressed a similar thought when he said, "Good aspect [of online learning] is that you don't have to be physically in the classroom… I can have more flexible time about how I am going to work on assignments. I can manage my time."

Sam noted:

Students do not have to wait until other students finished their talking… In online, everyone can post their opinions at their convenience. Students can have up to five days to post the answers and respond to others [because it is on a weekly basis]. They can take times to post and respond their opinions of other students. I think this is related to the flexibility of online courses.

All participants in this study shared that they have positive experiences because online courses were flexible and convenient. They discussed that they did not have exact class times and that they could manage their time more freely. Participants felt that they could review materials multiple times before class to assist them with their class discussions in English.

Sociocultural Experiences

Communication and preference. While participants indicated that they had positive experiences with online learning, some of them preferred face-to-face courses to online courses because they could have instant and direct communication with professors and classmates in face-to-face classrooms. As explained by William,

> I care more about interactions between professors and students in the classes…I would choose the face-to-face classes which have more interactions between students and professors…Face-to-face class is more about classmates' [initial] thoughts and discussions. I want to know their instant response and initial thoughts, not organized or prepared ones.

Rucy also shared,

> I would prefer a face-to-face course to an online course because I have a lot of questions as an international student when taking courses. I prefer to solve those problems in face-to-face classes with my professors. It is easier for me to communicate to describe questions…and a face-to-face course gives me more chance to have interaction with my classmates.

Ellie and Sam also liked to take face-to-face courses because they could communicate more with professors and classmates and ask questions immediately and directly. Xia reported that her preference between the two depended on the quality of the class and comments from friends. Only July liked to choose online courses over face-to-face courses because she could save face and not worry about the fluency of her speech and she could process words from her native language to English. Most participants shared that they valued the communication with instructors and classmates, and they wanted more access to their instructors. This was pivotal in their belief that face-to-face classes were more useful than online courses.

A sense of belonging. Lastly, the participants felt that a sense of belonging depended on their own experience and situation. Xia shared how her online group included her experiences within class discussion that supported her sense of belonging while Ellie felt a sense of belonging during the online discussion boards with voice threads. July mentioned her sense of belonging was achieved through her professors. She explained:

> [I have been here for 14 years but] when I speak with a couple of friends who don't share the same culture or I feel like I don't know the topic that they are talking about… I still don't know how I can fit in sometime. Both my instructor and classmates are helpful to feel a sense of belonging but a good instructor is more helpful because Koreans [might] place more importance on the authority.

July added that personal feedback or comments from professors made her feel more part of the class.

> Not all participants felt a sense of belonging. Sam stated:

> In some of courses that I had taken, which were [related to] gender issues or language legacy, I could not join [in the discussion] because I have no background knowledge. They [Classmates] were [sometimes] talking about their high school life in America. [But] I did not have any experience [in America].

Rucy also shared experiences of not belonging in one face-to-face classes. She replied:

> When there are lots of native speakers in classes, [I feel that] international students do not become major part of the class…Teachers speak faster and those native speakers in the classroom would [also] response very quickly. International students need time to think about what they need to say to translate in their own mind…I think that is little bit stressful for me in the class that has lots of native speakers.

She also mentioned one special experience in an online class. In this class, the professor asked students to schedule face-to-face meetings. Rucy contended that the professor's strategy of having face-to-face meetings and interactions in her online class was good [teaching strategy] for all students including international students and her. When there were inclusiveness from professors and classmates, the participants felt a sense of belonging.

Discussion

The participants in this study felt that the atmosphere of Asian classrooms was different from that of American classrooms. According to the previous studies, Asian classrooms were teacher-centered and focused on delivering knowledge where teachers are the authority and the major knowledge source for students. In Asian classrooms, students were not encouraged to ask questions in classes since such actions are viewed as the students wasting other students' time, thus taking away from instruction time (Choi, 2015; Wang, 2006). On the other hand, instruction in the U.S is inquiry-based learning where asking questions and creativity are encouraged from students (An, Kulum, & Wu, 2004; Correa, Perry, Sims, Miller, & Fang, 2008). However, participants in this study discussed the differences between online and face-to-face classes in the U.S. and their motherlands and how they had to adjust to instruction in U.S. classes.

Another important result in this study is that most participants considered online courses are effective in terms of flexibility and convenience. Similar results were found in a study conducted by Treuhaft (2000), that noted the removal of geographical barriers with the technology not only encourage students to gather in the online education but also enabled them to take online courses everywhere at any time. All the participants in this study agreed that flexible time and location were the best part of online education. Participants noted that while taking online courses, they were able to manage their time. Participants also expressed that online discussions were helpful for international students because it provided them time to develop their thoughts about the assigned topics to enable them to participate in the online discussions. Similar findings are evident in a study conducted by Smith and Hardaker (2000) that found that online discussions have suggested that interactions in online program can enhance student participation and help to produce more in-depth discussions.

Studies support that interaction and communication involving constructive systems should be the first task to create successful educational experiences in distance education (Scholosser & Simonson, 2006; McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001; Moore & Kearsley, 2005). It was noted that students who took online courses were inclined to have negative opinions when their course did not have active communication. To be specific, Asian students, who were used to teacher centered classroom (Wilson, 2001), relied on the instructors (Wang, 2006), and

wanted to have clear instructions from teachers, tend to have negative attitudes toward online learning when they had no interaction with teachers. This also affected a sense of belonging of Asian students, which was related to their interaction with instructors and classmates in online learning. Students in this study felt that a part of the class when they were involved in active online discussion boards and shared same topics with other classmates. Students also felt that teaching strategies used by professors were one of the strongest factors in their online learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study involving online academic experiences of Asian international graduate students denoted that participants had positive perspectives of their online learning and sociocultural experiences and felt a sense of belonging. The participants shared concerns about interactions and communications with classmates and professors. Some shared that they felt alienation in classes when the class topics were culturally biased. Base on the results of this study, several recommendations are discussed below.

Recommendation 1

U.S professors must increase their awareness about the academic and sociocultural experiences of Asian students. The academic experiences of Asian students are in teacher-centered classrooms and they tend to defer to their teachers as the authority. This is different in U.S classrooms that tend to be student-centered. While Asian students in this study had positive attitudes toward online learning, they stated that active communication with professors and personal and detailed feedback from professors can enhanced positive attitudes. Therefore, this study encourages professors to increase communication with Asian students through face-to-face or video chatting at least several times a semester and by providing personal feedback on class assignments. Such actions could increase Asian students' motivation and their sense of belonging in online classes.

Recommendation 2

Incoming Asian students should become familiar with learning experiences in online and face-to-face classrooms in the U.S. It is important for students to know American culture and educational environments before they start to study in the U.S. Such information could assist

them in adapting to the American culture. Students can read assigned materials and search unfamiliar terminology before coming to online classes. This can be helpful in increasing their sense of belonging and would make it easier for them to join online discussions.

Recommendation 3

Increase opportunities for Asian students to interact with American students. Both Asian and American students can learn about the social and cultural experiences of each other while working on class projects. Many nuances of American culture can only be taught through interactions between Asian students and American students. These interactions can occur in out of classroom experiences such as attending campus organizations' meetings and programs, athletic events or cultural programs.

Overall, Asian students in this study felt positive about their online classes, however, they wanted more interactions with both classmates and professors. As in this study, Asian students noted that there are differences between classroom instruction in their native country and classroom instruction in the US. In conclusion, Asian students, American professors and American students can all benefit if they will increase their cultural knowledge base about each other.

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