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Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding

MAJOR CONCERNS FOR AFRICAN STUDENTS IN THE SYSTEM OF RUSSIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Svetlana Kolova (a), Elena Yaroslavova (b)*, Oksana Belkina (c),
Anoma Anoma Isaak Eriann (d)
*Corresponding author

(a) Department of Foreign Languages, South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, Russian Federation

(b) Institute of Linguistics and International Communication, South Ural State University, 454080, 76 Lenin
Prospect, Chelyabinsk, Russian Federation, yaen@bk.ru

(c) Department of Foreign Languages, South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, Russian Federation

(d) Institute of Linguistics and International Communication, South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, Russian
Federation

Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine educational, cross-cultural, social, communicative challenges that African students might encounter at South Ural State University, Russia. The study was conducted among 60 students and uses Identity Negotiation Theory as the leading theoretical framework. Besides, Adaptation Theory supported the research to promote better understanding of concerns for African students and find better solutions for resolving potential problems. The study also considers international students' contributions to the student society made at various levels, i.e. in academic reputation, cultural exchange and financial income. Research has examined several crosscutting issues in relation to adaptation and adjustment problems experienced by African students: cross-cultural, academic, psychological, behavioral, physical health problems. They face problems coping with class schedules, learning and teaching styles and other difficulties related to language, culture and personal barriers. Although SUSU provides the necessary learning environment and resources for learning Russian, this student category needs additional and enhanced support to develop language skills in Russian and adapt to an educational environment they might be unfamiliar with. Based on with the results obtained from this research, some suggestions and recommendations are presented.

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1. Introduction

Increasing internationalization of Higher Education is a global trend. The Universities' competitiveness is ranked based on criteria such as academic and employer reputation, research quality, and the level of internationalization. A major, but not exclusive, indicator of internationalization is the number of overseas students enrolled in programmes in national universities. Thus, as a participant of 5-100 Project since 2016, South Ural State University should increase the share of foreign students educated in the University's core educational programs to 18% by 2020 (Roadmap, 2018). At higher education institutions throughout Russia, international students are enrolled at continually increasing rates (Open doors, 2019). Presently, about 1800 international students are enrolled at SUSU originating from 56 countries. 3.3% of them are from African countries.

Yet, many higher educational institutions in Russia have few or no campaigns to increase the number of African students. Student exchange programs and internships could aim at integrating African students into international and domestic communities. Creating and sustaining such cooperation requires proper competences and intercultural communication skills among both international and domestic students.

2. Problem Statement

Cross-cultural communication is special as it studies communication across different cultures and social groups, and the way that culture affects communication. It also involves issues of understanding different cultures, languages and customs of people from other countries.

Culture on the other hand refers to accumulative deposit of knowledge, experiences, belief systems, values, attitudes, religion, notion of time, roles, spatial religions, concepts of the universe, material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and a given group striving.

However, literature around cross-cultural communication acknowledges there is a lack of such communication among African and domestic students in a variety of campuses in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, which are among the top ten destinations for international students (Kamara, 2012).

International communication involves the exchange of information, thoughts, ideas and emotions across borders, with people from different cultures and even geographical location. International learners and African students in particular face certain difficulties in their education abroad. These are caused by the influence of the target language on the way of perception via source language, the interdependence of the language as an indicator of ethnic mentality and thinking (Kim, 2017). In recognizing obvious interrelations of language and thinking, it is necessary to admit the existence of a correlation between specific types of language and specific types of thinking.

3. Research Questions

The study explores the following questions:

- How do African international students and domestic students communicate?
- How do these communicative interactions fit within the larger communicative dynamics?

– What factors influence communication decisions and behaviors of African international students and domestic students?

– What are the main challenges faced by African international students and what can be done to help solve these issues?

– The ultimate goal of this study is to examine means to improve the quality of higher education through the promotion of internationalization and harmonization of programs and curricula in this University (SUSU) as well as other Russian universities.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present critical study aims to:

– to identify and analyze the most important challenges and crucial aspects of educational and social interaction of African international students in South Ural State University;

– to find out reasons for conflicts and misunderstandings;

– to study the theoretical background of the problem;

– to point out loopholes and come up with proposals / recommendations to mitigate or resolve conflicts so as to promote comprehension, cooperation and equality.

5. Research Methods

African Anthropologist Nkwi (2010) believes culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups including their embodiments in artifacts. It is important to note that culture is a powerful human tool for survival, but also a fragile phenomenon.

In addition, cross-cultural communication refers to the interpersonal communication and interaction across different cultures. This has become an important issue in our age of globalization and internationalization (Gui et al., 2016). Effective cross-cultural communication is concerned with overcoming cultural differences across nationalities, religions, borders, cultures and behavior patterns. Some outstanding researchers examined best practices of cross-cultural interaction of Africans in academic environment, and studied the effect of ethical sensitivities of people from different countries. Wang and Zhang (2015) identified the major cultural challenges facing the global workforce that create particular behavioral dilemmas for individuals, professionals in overseas projects, domestic as well as culturally diverse work groups, multinational work groups, cross-border careers and senior expatriate leadership.

Identity Negotiation Theory provides a key theoretical framework (Ting-Toomey, 2005). It developed from social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory highlights the fact that people attempt to find positive social identities when they interact with people from different cultures. Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory explains how cultural identities are formed and how they are negotiated among participants in their encounters. Cultural Identity Negotiations are said to be conducted frequently.

It is claimed that in communication, the participants' own perspectives and values decide whether the underlying communication involves cultural dimensions or not. Cultural identities have a great

influence on interpersonal communications. Together with Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005), Adaptation Theory contributed to our research to promote better understanding of challenges and find better solutions (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013).

The degree to which individuals undergo such cross-cultural challenges varies widely, depending on the situations involving international migration, exchange activities, and motives for relocating to another culture.

In the face of challenges in the host environment, newcomers are compelled to learn to detect similarities and differences between new surroundings and their original cultures (Ren-Zhong & Wei-Ping, 2019). Over time and through continuous interactions with the host environment, they become increasingly proficient at handling situations they encounter. Although the tribulations of crossing cultures can be staggering, each adaptive challenge opens opportunities to learn and grow beyond the perimeters of the original culture.

Couched in various terms such as culture shock, acculturation, adjustment, assimilation, integration, and adaptation, the field varies by perspectives and foci. Researchers (Ren-Zhong & Wei-Ping, 2019) typically isolate segments of the adaptation phenomenon specific to disciplinary and individual interests. This has resulted in dichotomous distinctions drawn between macro- and micro-level processes and between short- and long-term adaptations.

- Acculturation, for example, refers to the process by which individuals acquire at least some aspects of the host culture. Coping and adjustment are terms often used to indicate the psychological responses to cross-cultural challenges, whereas integration points to an individual's social participation in the receiving community. This is related to other important terms:
- Enculturation: the learning of one's own culture as we are brought up.
- Deculturation: the process of unlearning our original culture, leaving behind its patterns when we move to a new culture.

6. Findings

According to statistics, most international students in Russia come from Kazakhstan (53,809 or 28.8%), followed by Belarusians (17,724 or 9.4%), Ukrainians rank third (15,978 or 8.5%), the top-five also include representatives from Turkmenistan (15,631 or 8.4%) and Uzbekistan (15,025 or 8%). The top-ten further add Azerbaijanis, Chinese, Tajiks, Moldavians and representatives of India. African international students make up only (5%) (Open doors, 2019). The number of international students coming to SUSU has grown speedily since 2015. In 2019 the students coming to SUSU were mostly from Kazakhstan (26.9%), followed by China (22.5) and Arab countries (15.5). Others originated from Tadjikistan (12.6), Uzbekistan (7.2), Turkmenistan (4.6), African countries (3.3) and Kirghizia (3.2).

International students study in more than half of the today's 950 educational public and private higher education institutions in Russia. They contribute to the diversity and internationalization of academic and public activities.

For example, these students bring different perspectives to problems in classrooms, enhance mutual understanding and appreciation of differences found around the world. Therefore, it is important to accept

international students in Russian universities as they contribute substantially to the student community on many diverse levels. These levels include academic prestige, cultural exchange and financial income.

To begin with, international students are extremely important to higher education of any country for both academic prestige and financial advantage. Thus, for example, it is found that students demonstrate substantially more interest in their studies, if they attend an academic institution enrolling international students.

It is commonly held that international students are hard-working, eager to learn, demonstrating a great desire to get straight As. The basic level of subject skills of international and Russian students maybe roughly identical. Sometimes, it is even higher among foreigner students, because more lecture time may be provided for the academic discipline in the curriculum. As a result, international students often need help from fellow Russian students to understand complex issues. At the same time, Russian students have more incentives to study the subject, which spurs a sense of competition with international students (Safdar & Berno, 2016). Thus, international students enhance the academic performance of universities in which they study because they show a good level of academic training. Especially, when the student's home country sends them to study abroad, there may be quite a rigorous selection of candidates. Not only is the applicant's performance in basic subjects taken into account, but also their general cultural competence. Consequently, Russian universities get decent, academically prepared students. Even if they have high ratings at home, international students must still meet the requirements in language training. As a side effect, these students contribute new ways of thinking to Russian universities and intensify competition in academic achievement.

African international students constitute an increasingly important source of ethno-cultural diversity. They enrich the cultural diversity with their own home cultures and ethnic knowledge.

In addition, international students help faculty and students to develop their cultural sensitivities and skills in working with people from different social and cultural backgrounds (Hammer et al., 2003). International students may provide opportunities for the Russian faculty, students and the whole society to practice speaking different foreign languages, gain practical knowledge about other cultures and traditions only if domestic students are receptive to their contributions.

In addition, international students make important investments in the economy and international relations through their tuition fees and living expenses. According to UNESCO experts, teaching foreign citizens can become one of the most lucrative exports in the XXI century. For example, China alone pays one billion US dollars annually for teaching its students, trainees, and graduate students abroad. As a whole, according to the US Department of Commerce, expenditures of international students enrolled in all 50 states contributed more than \$30 billion to the US economy in 2014 (Open doors, 2019).

However, many international students face challenges in higher education outside their home countries, especially in a country like Russia due to many factors. Beside harsh climatic conditions, they face issues such as different food, unfamiliar living conditions, financial problems, while rebalancing academic and social lives. In their search for job opportunities, they may face severe limitations. They need to integrate class schedules, learning styles, and overcome language, cultural, and personal barriers. Students may encounter numerous difficulties adopting to new routines in unfamiliar cultures.

Consequently, if institutions enroll international students, they need to consider such issues. Below are the challenges that African international students usually point out.

Empirical methods have been used to gather and interpret data on challenges African international students at SUSU face. A quantitative survey was supplemented by a qualitative focus group interview. Data were coded and categorized in terms of academic, social and cultural aspects. The group of academic difficulties included four themes relating to the difficulties of international students in learning and academic achievement (Asif, 2017).

Research has examined several multi-faceted issues in relation to adaptation and adjustment problems experienced by international students. Cross-cultural experiences challenge a person's sense of well-being and may cause homesickness, loneliness, culture shock, perceived discrimination, financial difficulties, loss of support systems, lack of relationships, etc. (Russell et al., 2010). Several articles emphasize the importance of sociocultural adaptation. Sociocultural adaptation problems may include struggling to learn about the host country's norms and culture, difficulties in language, and issues in racial and ethnic discrimination (Kravets, 2013). Language issues such as insufficient levels of proficiency in English or the host country's language affect academic performance in understanding new concepts. Problems may also arise if students are unable to participate in university programs and interact with their professors, supervisors or advisory staff (Russell et al., 2010).

Other themes related to adaptation and adjustment include problems with physical and psychological health. Physical health problems may be related to changes in diets, activity levels, and sleep patterns. In general, even domestic students face changes in their lives as they enter university. Domestic students may eat their own cooked meals or eat buffet-style food in refectories from their residence halls, continue in activities they enjoyed previously before college and may have a change in their amount of sleep. To even larger extents, African international students may need to adjust to new lifestyles, activity levels, and diets in their host country, which creates stress for body and mind (Russell et al., 2010). African international students may experience depression, anxieties, and higher levels of stress while studying at a foreign university (Kusek, 2015).

Other areas of concern include feelings of helplessness, paranoia, and irritability, which may also result from harsh climatic conditions. These health issues are linked to physical problems including irregular sleep patterns, loss of appetite, reduced energy levels, greater likelihood to catch illnesses, and persistent somatic issues.

African students receive extraordinary attention at universities or in the streets. In hostels, many international and domestic students report problems with Chinese students resulting in frequent arguments among domestic, Chinese and other international students. Some African international students also encounter biased attitudes, hostility and, to some extent, racism.

SUSU has designed and successfully implemented a system of services to support international students. This includes an International Office and an International Support Office, who accept international students to the main academic programs. They provide information and support to candidates and students on programs offered by the University, and assistance on other issues related to studying at SUSU. In addition to this, the Department of Russian as a Foreign Language runs pre-session courses and conducts

Russian language training during their studies at the university. Besides, international students get support from the Medical Centre and the South Ural Association of International Students.

The Center for Sociocultural Adaptation (CSCA) plays a major role in overcoming, adapting and adjusting to problems raised above. The CSCA is part of a major project to ensure comfortable environments for foreign students: M.3.3.2 “Developing infrastructure of the bilingual environment, forming linguistic and intercultural competences of the employees” insures compliance at South Ural State University within the framework of Project 5-100 as it aims to provide academic, psychological, and recreational support for international students as soon as students start their education at SUSU (Belkina et al., 2019).

Thus, a Conversation Club (CC) has proved to be an effective tool to develop communication skills in Russian. The CC is a space for friendly, informal discussion where CSCA staff and volunteers help participants chat and guide conversations in beneficial directions. The topics of meetings are selected either by surveying students, or relating to events taking place in the world.

Students coming from African countries often speak French as their L1. Therefore English cannot be used as an intermediary language. In this case, a combination of teaching resources is preferable, both visual and auditory. A visual dictionary with pictures and labels is compiled exclusively in Russian. Each CC is accompanied by a game that helps overcome language barriers, get to know each other and create a friendly atmosphere of communication. Various communication games work very well, in the format of debates and role-plays.

South Ural State University has developed a special socio-cultural course for international students. The “Intercultural Communication” course embraces various aspects of cultural communication and develops socio-cultural skills as essential constituents of professionally-oriented communicative competence. It has its own specific structure and comprises the study of different important components: behaviour, functions and cognitive skills.

Special attention is paid to major components of sociocultural competence including behavior, polycentrism, empathy, flexibility, and tolerant judgment. In our seminars and workshops, we focus on special cross-cultural and social content emphasizing the importance of intercultural awareness, intercultural skills and existential competence (Kolova et al., 2017).

7. Conclusion

Based on observations of academic, socio-cultural, psychological problems of African students in SUSU, we conclude that they need additional support in order to better develop language skills in Russian and adapt to the new educational environment. This despite appropriate provisions in their learning environment, and the necessary resources for learning Russian. They face problems integrating class schedules, learning and teaching styles and overcoming difficulties related to language, culture and personal barriers. Observations of socio-cultural problems of African students in Chelyabinsk have found some experience extraordinary attention in public and at the University.

On the basis of results obtained in this study, some recommendations have been synthesized as follows:

1. Projects should be developed aiming to support the integration of African students into the Russian education system and society. Such projects could provide information and support African students to better adapt to the education system of the Russian Federation with descriptions of programs and courses in the native language of students.

2. Special kinds of activities should be organized for Africans and enrolling international students after finishing pre-session courses in the host university.

3. In-service training programs for instructors on managing international students should be conducted on the regular basis.

4. A platform to exchange problems and share experience to provide regular feedback for African international students is a great concern.

It is suggested that all these measures will facilitate better adaptation, cross-cultural understanding and will create necessary conditions to avoid culture shock. This will ensure better conditions for their educational success and student welfare.

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