

CULTURE SHOCK AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADAPTATION PROCESS

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The increasing numbers of students and scholars attending institutions of higher education abroad and the psychological, socio-cultural and educational experience quality of this large group of people is of utmost importance in the global intercultural understanding. It is no surprise that the literature has been concerned with students' adaptation problems. This article reviews the theories, factors, stages of culture shock, considers their relevance to the process of adaptation in student sojourners, and seeks to clarify and extend them in relation to this group.

Key words – adaptation process, culture shock, international students, challenge, disorientation, communication.

Being a student is a challenge, being an international student is an even bigger one. The student life in home country is pretty easy, but being a student by yourself in a different country can be hard.

Studying internationally is a new experience for everyone, and with new experiences come new challenges. You may occasionally feel confused, unsure and uncomfortable in an X country. People may have different values and new ways of doing things that seem strange to you. You may feel that everything has changed, including your immediate support system of family and friends.

The first and foremost challenge that every international student has to face is **the cultural shock** they go through while adjusting to life in a new country. The ways that things are done here are going to definitely be different from the ways you would do things in your home country. The culture, the atmosphere and the people are different.

“Culture shock” is a term used to describe the anxiety produced when a person moves from a familiar culture to an entirely different cultural or social environment. Familiar sights, sounds and smells are no longer around and small things can easily upset a person and can feel out of proportion¹. Meeting lots of new people and learning the ways of a new country. It also includes the shock of being separated from the important people in your life, such as family, friends, colleagues, and teachers: people you would talk to at times of uncertainty, people who give you support.

Culture is way too complex to explain logically. Culture shock always grows out of the difficulties in adapting to a new culture. When international students are

¹ Warwick Counselling Service // https://warwick.ac.uk/services/counselling/information/pages/culture_shock/.

trying to merge into a new culture of any other nation, most of them are shocked for the first time.

Some of the symptoms associated with culture shock include²

- Sadness, loneliness, melancholy
- Preoccupation with health
- Aches, pains, allergies
- Insomnia or excessive sleep
- Changes in mood, depression, feeling vulnerable
- Anger, irritability, resentment
- Frequent frustration
- Being easily angered
- Loss of identity
- Lack of confidence
- Obsessions over cleanliness
- Longing for family
- Feeling of being lost or overlooked

It occurs when the language, gestures, customs, signs and symbols that you are used to and previously helped you to make such of your surrounding suddenly have no meaning or have new meanings. Perhaps most upsetting is the loss of social support system (family, friends, classmates, coworkers), and the necessity of starting all over again in an unfamiliar environment.

Many international students feel disorientation when experiencing an entirely new way of life and find it difficult to adjust to the culture of their host country. Leaving home and traveling to study in a new country can be a stressful experience, even though it may be something you have planned and prepared for. Whether an individual moves to a country with the same first language or not, the process of assimilating the new culture can be a time of great emotional turbulence. Many people are surprised when they experience the impact of culture shock, and it can be helpful to realize your experience is actually quite normal.

Dr. Oberg says: "When an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will he may be, a series of props has been knocked out from under him"³.

² International Student Insurance, Culture Shock for International Students // <https://www.internationalstudentinsurance.com/explained/culture-shock-for-international-students.php>.

³ **Gordon A.** Horizons: How to Cope with Culture Shock // <https://static1.squarespace.com>, p. 1-4.

Here are some factors that can contribute to culture shock.

1. Language problem. In most cases, foreigners cannot speak as fluently as natives. And there is a certain amount of hesitation for them to speak out because of their poor language ability. Also, it is not easy for international students to fully understand the underlying meanings of some words. Hence come the communication gap and lack of understanding. Listening and speaking in a new language is tiring. In class, some international students have trouble understanding the lecture and reading materials. People speak quickly and you may feel embarrassed to ask them to repeat what they said. If English is not your first language, you may find you miss your home language. Although many international students take “Test of English as a foreign language”, also known as the TOEFL test which evaluates their listening, reading and writing skills and is required for non-native English speakers in order to be allowed to study abroad, it doesn’t help them with the real problems they have to face once they have passed it. Many students struggle with understanding lectures and interacting with professors. Basic skills such as taking notes, writing essays and coping with the quantity of reading for class can be big issues, because they are not measured and tested by TOEFL. Whether it be a language barrier, difficulty understanding an accent or being too shy to talk, communication in a new country can be difficult. Some of ISEC students studying at University of Tuscia (Italy), Paul Sabatier University (Toulouse III, France) shared their first experience and also talked about the solutions they found.

“Sometimes a professor might make an inside joke about Iowa and international students don’t understand the context, so they feel left out”.

“In some classes, I had no idea what the professor was talking about, I had to go to countless professors during office hours and ask them what they meant”.

“English skills often are like a barrier when communicating with foreign students”.

“Everything is going so fast, everyone is constantly rushing, no one really stops to engage in a conversation with friends. That’s so stressful for me”.

“Communicating with students was a little difficult at first, especially due to my pronunciation or my grammar. I was very afraid of making mistakes”.

The only solution to such a problem is to open up to people. Even if you think that you are wrong or are too shy to start a conversation, try to go out and talk to people. That’s the only way you can start to understand them. People are very good human beings and they will respect the fact that you are trying. One should not be scared of making mistakes; it’s a good way to learn things. To really learn the language, it is important to spend as much time as possible speaking it.

Many international students find it is easier at first to speak English to other international students, but one should avoid spending too much time with students from the same country. The more you speak it, the better your English will become.

"I was scared; my English level was far from amazing. But once there, I jumped right in and everything went smoothly. It did take me a couple of months to adapt to the language and culture, but the fact that I was part of the tennis team made a huge difference".

"I am very shy and I simply can connect better with international students. They have the same challenges; they understand how I feel, because they've been through the same".

"I had a lot of group assignments and had to communicate with native speakers on a daily basis, so I had to make friends quickly, which helped me a lot".

"I recorded myself talking and sent it to my teachers in order to get feedback and improve my English speaking skills".

"I recommend watching English movies with English subtitles to practice pronunciation and listening skills".

"I got used to making mistakes over time. I learnt that I don't have to speak perfectly. People still understand the basic points I'm making".

"Don't shy away from mistakes; learn from them, keep the conversation going, that's very important when it comes to learning any language. Perfection just prevents us from speaking fluently".

2. Social roles⁴. Social behaviors may confuse, surprise or offend you. For example you may find people appear cold, distant or always in a hurry. Or you may be surprised to see couples holding hands and kissing in public. You may find the relationships between men and women more formal or less formal than you are used to, as well as differences in same sex social contact and relationships.

3. Climate⁵. Many students find the northwest climate can affect them a lot. You may find the grayness and dampness, especially during the winter months, difficult to get used to.

4. 'Rules' of behavior. As well as the obvious things that hit you immediately when you arrive, such as sights, sounds, smells and tastes, every culture has unspoken rules which affect the way people treat each other. These may be

⁴ Zhou Y., Jindal-Snape D., Topping K. & Todman J. Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. Published online: 16 May 2008, p. 63-75 // <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03075070701794833>.

⁵ UK Council for International Student Affairs 50. Facing cultural shock // <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Preparation-and-Arrival/Facing-culture-shock>.

less obvious, but sooner or later you will probably encounter them and once again the effect may be disorientating. For example, there will be differences in the ways people decide what is important, how tasks are allocated and how time is observed. In business and academic life, keeping to a schedule is important. You should always be on time for lectures, classes and meetings with academic and administrative staff. If you are going to be late for a meeting, do try to give advance notice.

5. Value System. Although you may first become aware of cultural differences in your physical environment, (e.g. food, dress, behavior) you may also come to notice that people from other cultures may have very different views of the world from yours. Cultures are built on deeply-embedded sets of values, norms, assumptions and beliefs. It can be surprising and sometimes distressing to find that people do not share some of your most deeply held ideas, as most of us take our core values and beliefs for granted and assume they are universally held. As much as possible, try to suspend judgment until you understand how parts of a culture fit together into a coherent whole. Try to see what people say or do in the context of their own culture's norms. This will help you to understand how other people see your behavior, as well as how to understand theirs. When you understand both cultures, you will probably find some aspects of each that you like and others that you don't.

6. Relationship Stress. If your spouse or partner has accompanied you remember that the stress of the transition may cause struggles in your relationship. The transition to a new culture may be very difficult for your partner. Your partner may feel very isolated; he/she has been transplanted from your culture and separated from family and friends. Simple tasks can be stressful due to the language barrier. Often times they do not have opportunities to engage in productive, meaningful activity such as pursuing a degree, and it may be more difficult for them to make new friends.

7. Home-sickness. Home-sickness is another big challenge that you might have to face when coming to a new culture, unless you already have family or friends here. When you come here alone, knowing absolutely no one, you might face this problem every day for the first month or so. This is a very natural and common feeling, but again you cannot sit at a place and wish for things to change. Make a habit of talking to your friends and family back home regularly, but try not to only talk to them. Go out and talk to people here in your new home; make friends, go hang out with some people, it's not bad.

8. Finances. Keeping up with your finances, be it earnings or savings, is another major thing to focus on. Even if you have heaps of money in your accounts

keep records of your wasteful expenditure and try to bring it down (that's a lesson for life). Getting a job might not be that difficult but keeping a hold of it could be. Keep looking for opportunities and never miss one. Everything that helps you earn money is important. However, if you can, it is definitely sensible to choose a job which gives you a better future over a job with better money.

To minimize the shock, you will probably want to keep in touch with family and friends back home—but it is important to also identify new sources of support. People whom you meet through your university international student office may also be a likely source of support. You could also contact relatives or friends who live in X country to ask for their advice. Because of culture shock, international students sometimes feel confused to know what is appropriate and what is not.

Here is some advice on how to cope with this situation:

- Remind yourself that everything you're feeling is perfectly normal
- Surround yourself with familiar items, such as photos or ornaments⁶
- Try to find familiar food if you can. Eat a healthy and balanced diet
- Maintain contact with your ethnic group as well as with local students⁷
- Keep in touch with your friends and family back home via email, text, or telephone
- Learn to include a regular form of physical activity into your routine
- Follow your ambitions and continue your plans for the future⁸
- Take the first step and find activities which will give you a common interest with other students.
- Talk to international students dealing with culture shock, and reach out to them⁹
- Don't overwhelm yourself and get nervous
- Get familiar with the libraries. Watch a movie outside. Do some shopping. Try a local restaurant or cafeteria
- Ask questions, and don't be afraid to try. Most people will be pleased to teach you about their country and customs

⁶ **Abe J., Talbot D.M. and Geelhoed R.J.** Effects of a peer program on international student adjustment // *Journal of College Student Development* 39, 1998, p. 539-547.

⁷ International Student Insurance, Culture Shock for International Students // <https://www.internationalstudentinsurance.com/explained/culture-shock-for-international-students.php>.

⁸ Warwick Counselling Service // https://warwick.ac.uk/services/counselling/informationpages/culture_shock/.

⁹ LEARNING ABROAD Global Engagement; Orientation and Cultural Preparation; <https://learningabroad.utah.edu/handbook/orientation.php>.

- And finally, when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

There are several stages of culture shock. Some people go through the stages of this process multiple times, and some may only partially apply to you. Normally, there are **a Fascination Period or the Honeymoon Stage, a Frustration Period or the Disintegration Stage: a Gradual Adjustment Period or the Reintegration Stage: and an Acceptance Period or the Acceptance Stage.**

1. **The Honeymoon Stage**¹⁰. During this stage, everything about the new culture is exciting to you. You are optimistic and will generally focus on the positive aspects of your new home. You will study your new language with enthusiasm and make great progress. During this stage, memories of home are still recent and form a kind of protective shield.
2. **The Disintegration Stage**. This stage can be triggered without warning by a small incident or by no cause at all. You will start to view cultural differences as a source of conflict. You might feel isolated, confused, and depressed, and miss familiar supports.
3. **The Reintegration Stage**. During this stage, you may begin to compare the new culture unfavorably with your home culture. You might begin to reject the differences you encounter and experience feelings of anger, frustration, and hostility towards the new culture. You might seek out comfort food from your home country in an attempt to reconnect with what you value about yourself and your own culture.
4. **The Acceptance Stage**. During this stage, you will learn to accept both differences and similarities between your home culture and the new one. You will become more relaxed and confident while you become more familiar with new situations and more experiences become enjoyable.

Sometimes the symptoms of culture shock last just a few days, but more often they last weeks or even months. It may seem like your friends adjust easily while you are suffering. Multiple factors affect the degree to which you might be affected, such as your pre-departure expectations, coping skills, and past experience living abroad.

¹⁰ International Student Insurance; Culture Shock for International Students // <https://www.internationalstudentinsurance.com/explained/culture-shock-for-international-students.php>. Warwick Counselling Service // https://warwick.ac.uk/services/counselling/informationpages/culture_shock/.

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Արտերկրում գտնվող բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատություններ հաճախող ուսանողների և գիտնականների մեծ թիվը ու այս մեծ խմբի հոգեբանական, սոցիալ-մշակութային և կրթական փորձի որակը չափազանց կարևոր է գլոբալ միջմշակութային փոխըմբռնման հարցում: Զարմանալի չէ, որ գրականության հիմնական խնդիրներից մեկն ուսանողների հարմարվողականությունն է: Հոգվածում անդրադարձ է արվում մշակութային շոկի տեսություններին, գործոններին, փուլերին, ինչպես նաև այս ամենի կարևորությանը միջազգային ուսանողների հարմարվողականության գործընթացում: Փորձ է արվում նաև պարզաբանելու և դրանք ընդլայնելու վերոնշյալ խմբի վերաբերմամբ:

Բանալի բաներ – հարմարվողականության գործընթաց, մշակութային շոկ, միջազգային ուսանողներ, մարտահրավեր, ապակողմնորոշում, հաղորդակցություն:

КУЛЬТУРНЫЙ ШОК И ПРОЦЕСС АДАПТАЦИИ СТУДЕНТОВ, ОБУЧАЮЩИХСЯ ЗА РУБЕЖОМ

ГОАР ГРИГОРЯН, АНИ УНАНЯН

Большая масса студентов и ученых, функционирующих в высших учебных заведениях зарубежья, и уровень психологического, социально-культурного и образовательного ценза этой значительной группы играют весьма существенную роль в вопросе глобального межкультурного взаимопонимания. Неудивительно, что одной из основных проблем специальной литературы является адаптация студентов. В статье анализируются теории, факторы, этапы культурного шока и их значение в процессе адаптации студентов, обучающихся за рубежом. Делается также попытка приложения их к вышеупомянутой группе.

Ключевые слова – процесс адаптации, культурный шок, студенты, обучающиеся за рубежом, дезориентация, коммуникация.