

# Research on Intercultural Adaptation Competence of College Student

## -- A Case Study of Short-term Internship in the United States

Wei He

School of Foreign Language, Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou, Sichuan, 635000, China

### Abstract

**This study examined the intercultural adaptation competence based on a case study of Chinese college student's three-month internship program in the United States. A qualitative approach involving 9 interviews with college students participating in this program was employed to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the cultural barriers in the process of their intercultural adaptation. Several differences in thinking patterns, value systems, eating habits, speaking patterns between the two cultures were revealed. The findings provide insights into how to guide students overcome those cultural difference in future teaching activities, as well as how to cultivate the intercultural adaptation competence of college students.**

### Keywords

**short-term internship in America; intercultural adaptation competence; college student.**

## 1. Introduction

The Outline of the National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) clearly stated that the task for College education is to cultivate high-quality talents who can participate in international competition and cooperation in 2010. The demand for developing international talents urges colleges o provide students with a large number of opportunities to study abroad. Most of these programs require students to study abroad two or three years to obtain a master's or doctor's degree, but some of them are short-term programs without a degree. A short-term study abroad program is to stay abroad for three or six months. Although a short-term study abroad program does not provide enough time for students to fully experience local customs, the flexibility and accessibility of it give opportunities for them to explore cultural differences and form intercultural sensitivities. [1]

After they arrive in the United States, Chinese students typically must adapt to the host Culture, and acquire intercultural adaptation competence (IAC). The IAC concept refers to the ability to adapt oneself to the host culture in ways that are both effective and appropriate, which requires not only sufficient language skills and knowledge about the host culture, but also a willingness to make a change. If they cannot adjust themselves to these cultural differences, those differences will harm them, and even cause culture shock. Culture shock refers to the feeling of being at a loss when one enters a new cultural environment, which results in one's psychological reaction of resisting the new culture and nostalgia for the old culture. The main reason is that people must give up their old habits and customs (such as language, diet and so on) in a new environment. If they cannot integrate themselves into the local community quickly, they will feel frustrated. On one hand, culture shock can leave negative effects on newcomers, such as preventing them from fitting into a new environment; on the other hand, culture shock

is very helpful for one's growth. Through overcoming culture shock, one can improve his intercultural communication skills. [2]

This study examines the process of using the IAC of college students in a short-term internship in America. Using a qualitative approach, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 9 college students experienced this program within four years, seeking to obtain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the cultural barriers in the process of their intercultural adaptation, as well as put forward corresponding strategies to improve their IAC.

## 2. Review of Literature and Rationale

As background for this study, literature on IAC was examined along with research on Intercultural Adaptation. Intercultural adaptation is a process of adjustment to the new cultural environment, which means a person need to overcome the negative impact of culture shock ranging from the communicative pattern, custom and living habit to value system when he gets into a new cultural environment, and adjust himself to the new culture and get settled in this new cultural community. [3]

Since the beginning of the 20th century, IAC has attracted the attention of scholars from the United States, Australia, Canada, The United Kingdom, German, and other countries. Many experts and linguists have conducted researches on this phenomenon from different perspectives. For example, Oberg proposed the concept of "culture shock", and Lysgaard put forward the U-shaped curve theory through the cross-cultural adaptation study of American Scandinavians. Gullahom proposed the theory of the W-Shaped curve, etc. [4]

IAC is a hot academic topic the domestic research recently. In CNKI, articles related to this topic from 2016 to 2019 are more than 200,80 articles in 2019, 100 articles in 2018,82 articles in 2017, and 68 articles in 2016 respectively. However, most of these articles are from the perspective of foreign students' intercultural adaptability in China. For example, Li Yan researched from daily life, language barriers, academic and interpersonal adaptation to get to know the IAC of students from Central Asian, and analyzed problems in the process of their adaptation and put forward corresponding solutions. [5]

Li Yan researched from the perspective of the psychological and social adaptation of students from Tajikistan in Xinjiang Province and proposed related measurements to enhance their cross-cultural adaptation. [6] Through the above-mentioned paper, it can be concluded that although there have been numerous researches on IAC of foreign students in China, it is hard to see researches focusing on the IAC of Chinese students in the United States, which is the focus of this study.

According to the theories of IAC and qualitative research, this study will focus on the following questions:

- 1.What makes you choose the program of a short-term internship in the United State?
2. Have you ever expected any cultural conflicts when you get to the United State?
3. Do you have any negative emotions in the process of adjusting yourself to live in the United States?
4. Did you experience any cultural conflicts during your stay in the United States?
5. What does this experience mean to you?
- 6.What courses do you think are helpful to develop your intercultural adaptation competence?

## 3. Method

First, collect the information of students who have participated in this short-term internship in the United States in the past four years. Next, conduct an in-depth interview of 9 participants,

and classify and code the information of 9 interviews. Finally, analyze the problems in the process of their intercultural adaptation in the United States.

### 3.1. Participants

This research invites nine students who have participated in this short-term internship program in the United States in the past 4 years for an in-depth interview, and analyzes the information from this interview. 9 students have no overseas travel or study experience before taking this program.

| Code | Gender | Grade     | Major               |
|------|--------|-----------|---------------------|
| 01   | Female | Senior    | Business English    |
| 02   | Female | Senior    | Business English    |
| 03   | Male   | Junior    | Business English    |
| 04   | Female | Senior    | Business English    |
| 05   | Female | Junior    | English Education   |
| 06   | Female | Sophomore | English Education   |
| 07   | Male   | Sophomore | English Education   |
| 08   | Female | Sophomore | English Translation |
| 09   | Male   | Sophomore | English Translation |

### 3.2. Research Process

Set up questions for an in-depth interview and conduct pre-interview. Before the formal interview, researcher set up questions, and discusses those questions with other team members. Afterward, interviewers randomly select one or two students to conduct the pre-interview, and modify questions according to the result of pre-interview. The above steps can fully ensure the integrity and reliability of questions for the formal in-depth interview.

Before the formal in-depth interview, all participants need to attend a meeting. At the meeting, the interviewer introduces the purpose and the questions involved in this interview, and explains the part that those participants are confused about. The data will be collected in the form of words and record, and each in-depth interview will last around 40 minutes. After the interview, the interviewer analyzes the recordings and transcripts, and write dairy to keep track of the analysis.

## 4. Data Collection and Analysis

### 4.1. The Reason for Participating in this Program

None of nine participants has experience of traveling or studying in the United States. As for the reasons for attending this program, participants No.1 and No.3 are to broaden their horizons and experience different cultures. Participants No.2 and No.5 are to lay a foundation for further study in the United States. Participants No.4 and No.6 are for enriching life experience. Participant No.7 wants to improve his language skills. Participants No.8 and No.9 are to practice their communication skills, especially intercultural communication skills.

It can be seen that 9 nine participants choose this program with different expectations, and their positive attitude can help them adjust to the new culture in the early stage of their stay in the United States.

### 4.2. Expectation of Cultural Conflicts

All 9 participants express fear of infringing local religions and customs during their stay in the United States, meanwhile, they also worry about the difference in diets and language barrier.

Although they have learned English for many, and choose English as their major in college, they still feel worried that they cannot communicate with local people in English.

With the trend of globalization, American culture is exported to all over the world with their movies, music. Although 9 participants who participated in the interview do not have the experience of going abroad, they have already obtained the knowledge of cultural differences between China and the United States by watching TV dramas and movies (such as living habits, eating habits, values, etc.) At the same time, the contact with foreign teachers in university makes them have intercultural sensitivity, knowing that cultural differences between people from different countries are inevitable.

### **4.3. Problems on the Arrival of the United States**

Participants No.1 often feel lonely and homesick, and always want to stay with people from the same culture; Participants No.3 is afraid to contact with American, because not every American can speak English for the United States is a country of immigrants of different countries. Therefore, she is afraid of communicating with local people for language barriers. Participant No. 05 and 06 also tend to staying with people from the same cultures.

Four participants (44%) who participate in the interview show difficulty in intercultural adaptation at the early stage of their stay in the United States, such as listening barrier and expression problems when interacting with local people, and travel difficulties. These difficulties make them afraid of communicating with local people, and participant No.5 even wants to return home during his second week in the US.

### **4.4. Example of Cultural Conflict and Analysis**

#### **4.4.1. Examples of Cultural Conflict in their Stay of the United States**

Participant No.1: Americans wear clothes at their own will, and they will wear what they want in daily life, and in winter there are people in shorts and slippers. As for education, parents let their child play freely, and do not protect children as Chinese parents do. The lives of the elderly in American are different from their counterparts in China, as they in America live in their old age by walking dogs, while the elderly in China take care of their grandchildren.

Participant No.2 and No.6: there are huge differences between Chinese and American food culture. American desserts are too sweet, and its staple food is the bread and mashed potatoes, while the Chinese take rice and noodles as their staple food. Westerners prefer cold food, while Chinese people are used to eating hot food. For example, Westerners are used to drinking cold water with ice cubes, while Chinese people prefer hot water. Participant No.6 mentions that on the arrival of the United States, he went to a restaurant for dinner, the waiter gave him a glass of ice water with ice cubes which surprised him a lot. Because in Chinese restaurants, the waiter will always give you a cup of hot water or hot tea. Later, when he goes out to eat again, even he reminds the waiter that he needs hot water, only to get a glass of cold water without ice.

Participant No.4: the cultural difference that touched me deepest is about transportation. Americans need to press a special button before they cross the street, which is the first cultural difference that I need to adjust on the arrival of this place, for I just need to follow the traffic lights to get across the street in China. At the same time, people in small cities need to drive if they want to go out because the public transportation in the small place is underdeveloped. However, I prefer to take public transportation to go out in China.

Participants No.03 and No.05: Chinese and Americans have different thinking patterns. Americans speak directly, while Chinese speak indirectly. Chinese rarely refuse friend's request directly, while Americans will say no if they do not want to. In work, Americans emphasize individualism and shoulder one's responsibility, while we prefer to work together.

Participants No.7: Americans show strong family values which are different from what I learned at school. Although Americans advocate individualism, they pay much attention to their family.

I work as a receptionist in a resort, and I find that they usually go on vacation by car on weekends, such as Las Vegas and Disney theme parks. American parents pay attention to quality time, so they are willing to company their children in their spare time.

Participants No.8: what surprises me a lot is that my impression on the United States formed when I watch TV series in China turn out to be untrue. Americans in their TV series are very friendly, easy to approach. However, during my stay in the United States, I find that although most Americans will say hello to strangers on the street, it is very hard to get into their lives and make friends with them. Meanwhile, Americans do not always hug or kiss others, especially those of the opposite sex.

Participants No.9: the biggest cultural conflict I feel is their Stereotype for Chinese. During my stay in the United States, Americans often ask me questions such as whether Chinese eat dogs or Can I Play Kung Fu? And I do not know how to answer those questions.

#### **4.4.2. Reason for Cultural Conflict**

The cultural differences given by 9 participants can be divided into two aspects, namely, the differences in external culture and internal culture (deep culture). External cultural difference refers to the differences a newcomer can see and feel, including differences in clothing, diet, vacation style, travel style, religious belief, etc. All 9 participants experience these differences on the arrival of the United States, and most of the external culture differences are what they expected to encounter. Therefore, 9 participants can adjust themselves to these cultural differences during their stay in the US.

Internal culture (deep culture) is the core value of the culture of one country. Internal culture is invisible on the surface, hard to be observed and followed by people from other cultures. Thinking patterns of China and the United States are different, that is why Americans tend to speak directly, while Chinese speak prefer the direct way. Other cultural differences like family value, education method also belong to invisible culture, which can be felt only in the contact with Americans. Those cultural differences are out of the expectations of 9 participants, and that is why they feel hard to adjust themselves to those differences.

Participants No.9 says that he does not like the stereotype of Chinese formed in American's eyes. Because most stereotypes of Chinese in America are negative and unfriendly, which makes him very angry and even feels resistant to adapt to local life. Because the Chinese government adopted the policy of open-up in the 1980s, Americans do not know Chinese culture very well, and there are prejudices in the report of American media. Therefore, Chinese should spread their own culture to the world in the future, so that others can have a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture

#### **4.5. The Impact of this Experience on Participant**

All 9 participants express that they benefit from this program in different ways, especially in listening and speaking. Three months in the United States broaden their horizon, enhance their tolerance of cultural differences, and obtain the awareness to adjust themselves to cultural differences with a positive attitude. Three months of overseas work experience make them more independent, and some of them even dare to work in other countries.

#### **4.6. Courses to Cultivate Student's IAC**

Participant No.1 and No.3: intercultural communication course can cultivate students' intercultural sensitivity and learn knowledge related to Chinese and American cultures.

Participant No.4: comprehensive English course can enlarge students' vocabulary, and lay a foundation for daily communication in English.

Participant No.2 and No.5: courses by foreign teachers offer students a chance to experience the cultural differences at home and improve their oral ability.

Participant No.7: courses of listening, debate and interpretation can not only improve students' listening ability, but also their oral ability.

## 5. Discussion

Professor Wen Qiufang Points out that intercultural communication competence combines two parts: cross-culture and communication. Communicative competence includes language competence, pragmatic competence and flexibility. Intercultural competence includes sensitivity to cultural difference, tolerance and flexibility in dealing with cultural differences. [7] Mastering intercultural adaptability is based on the acquisition of intercultural competence and communicative competence. Cultural adaptation is not to give up one's cultural identity, but to adapt oneself in another cultural environment. It is not to change the value in one culture, but the understanding of certain values. [2]

Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that 9 participants have intercultural awareness and be tolerant to those differences during their stay in the United States. However, they still feel hard to adapt themselves to local culture in the United States for insufficient knowledge for the deep culture in American culture and language competence, which hinders their integration into local society.

In order to improve the IAC of students taking part in this program in the future, this paper puts forward the following tactics.

### 5.1. Classroom Teaching

Classroom teaching is an important channel to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence, and intercultural communication course is one important course to achieve this goal. Intercultural communication has become a compulsory course for all sophomores in the School of Foreign Languages. Teachers of this course should make students realize that it is inevitable to encounter cultural differences between people from different places, and they should be aware of and tolerate cultural differences when communicating with people from other countries. At the same time, they should adjust their behavior according to the specific intercultural situations. The teacher can explain cultural differences between China and the United States, such as individualism VS collectivism, low-context VS high-context culture, low power VS high power distance. After the explanation of those terms, teachers can set up real intercultural scenes to provide students with a chance to practice, and then students can have a deeper understanding of thinking pattern, behavior and values of American.

Nine participants mention that they have listening and oral difficulties, colleges administration should give students chance to improve their listening and oral competence, such as organizing parties for foreign teachers and students, arranging English corner, salons, reading sharing, film and television appreciation, etc. Those activities let student realize the oral output and enhance their listening ability.

As for the listening, speaking and interpreting courses, college administration can combine these three courses with intercultural communication courses together to serve the purpose of developing the IAC of college student

### 5.2. Extracurricular Practice

The release of the "One Belt and One Road" policy by the Chinese government attracts students from different countries to study in China. Now there are more than 200 international students from Africa and Europe in this university. The university administration can make full use of the resources of the international student to offer opportunities for their students to experience cultural diversity, such as holding an international food festival and an international clothing festival. Through these activities, Chinese students have opportunities to communicate with overseas students from different countries. Those activities can help Chinese students improve

their oral English skills and stimulate their enthusiasm to understand foreign cultures in an active way.

For anyone who want to take part in this program in the future, school administration should offer them with counseling lasting two-three months before they go to the United States, and the counseling aims to make them get to know how to overcome the negative emotions that may occur during their stay in the United States. Such counseling can make them make necessary psychological preparations before they intercultural trip.

## 6. Conclusion

With the deepening of globalization, the exchanges between China and other countries have been increasing. Every year, a large number of Chinese students go to the United States or other countries for study or internship. However, due to cultural differences, these students have difficulty in adapting themselves to the local culture. Since certain cultural differences can be felt in daily life, such as food and clothing, while others cannot be observed by the outsider, like thinking patterns, daily behaviors. Those cultural differences cannot be seen called core values, which is hard for outsiders to follow. That is why those cultural differences will become the barrier when students adapt themselves to local culture during their early stages in the United States.

Through classroom teaching and extracurricular practice, students are trained to be sensitive to and tolerant of cultural differences. By understanding deep culture and getting along with foreign teachers in the university, students can acquire the flexibility to deal with cultural differences, and eventually develop their IAC.

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