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Exploring the Effects of Intercultural Learning on Cross-Cultural Adaptation in a Study Abroad Context

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This study targets Asian students studying abroad and explores the effects of intercultural learning on their cross-cultural adaptation by drawing upon a questionnaire survey. On the one hand, the results of this study find that under the influence of intercultural learning, students respond differently in their cross-cultural adaptation and no significant difference is shown in their responses. On the other hand, it is found that there exist either significant or insignificant differences in students' responses to two types of cross-cultural adaptation (i.e., psychological adaptation and social adaptation). Thus, the researcher concludes that it seems uneasy to predict the effects of intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation due to the complex component of cross-cultural adaptation. Although two types of cross-cultural adaptation are found to be different from each other, it is also found that they are closely linked to one another. The researcher also concludes that one type of cross-cultural adaptation may be influenced by the other and emphasizes the close relationship between psychological adaptation and social adaptation as a role in reflecting the effects of intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation among students studying abroad.

Keywords: intercultural learning, cross-cultural adaptation, psychological adaptation, social adaptation, study abroad

Introduction

With the trend towards internationalization and globalization in the 21st century, more and more people in the global society study abroad. According to the statistics, there are likely to be over one million students and scholars studying abroad in the world at any time within recent decades (Graddol, 2006). While promoting the internationalization of education is becoming one of the global phenomena urged by political concerns, economic needs, cultural interaction or the easiness of travel (Byram & Feng, 2006), study abroad programs provide students across the world with more and more opportunities to experience intercultural learning naturally as a consequence of using English as an international language and communicating with native speakers in daily life (Weber, 2005). Since students speaking English as an ESL/EFL (second or foreign language) and studying abroad in an English-speaking country may experience intercultural learning, the question concerning whether or not they can be affected by intercultural learning attracts the attention of the researcher. Thus, this study aims at Asian students studying abroad in an English-speaking country and investigates whether or not intercultural learning has an effect on their cross-cultural adaptation. While cross-cultural adaptation consisting of two types of cross-cultural adaptation (i.e., psychological adaptation and

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social adaptation) (Schumann, 1978) is hypothesized as something that may be affected by intercultural learning in a study abroad context, it is assumed that length of residence abroad is the factor of predicting the degree to which students studying abroad may experience intercultural learning. The following three questions will be discussed in this study:

(1) Is cross-cultural adaptation shown among students in three groups affected by intercultural learning in a study abroad context?

(2) Are two types of cross-cultural adaptation shown among students in three groups affected by intercultural learning in a study abroad context?

(3) Are two types of cross-cultural adaptation correlated with each other due to the impact of intercultural learning?

The Nature of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

In the discussion concerning whether or not intercultural learning has an effect on cross-cultural adaptation among students studying abroad, the first perspective of this study arises from the fact that cross-cultural adaptation by nature involves the encounter with the target culture and native speakers. For example, Kim (2001) pointed out that cross-cultural adaptation was viewed as the ability which an individual needed for interacting with the host environment. Begley (2003) maintained that cross-cultural adaptation was essential to intercultural communication. Kim (1988) asserted that cross-cultural adaptation enabled learners to make a change in completing their primary socialization processes in one culture and then to come into contact with new and unfamiliar cultures. However, studies have found that the L2 (second or target language) learners often lack cross-cultural adaptation in communication with native speakers during the total immersion in the host culture (Shi, 2006). As cross-cultural adaptation involves the totality of an individual's personal and social experiences through a complex system of communicative interfaces (Kim, 2001), however, the adaptive transformation process promotes cross-cultural sensitivity and the ability to achieve effective and meaningful intercultural communication (Cole & Zuengler, 2003). From this point, students studying abroad may get actively involved in intercultural learning and in turn overcome the problems in cross-cultural adaptation.

The Role of Intercultural Learning in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

While associating the nature of cross-cultural adaptation with the feasibility of intercultural learning in a study abroad context, the researcher considers intercultural learning to be a part of education which is beneficial for the development of cross-cultural adaptation outside the classroom in a study abroad context. Secondly, the perspective of this study relates the role of intercultural learning to the development of cross-cultural adaptation. For instance, Roberts, Byram, Baro, Jordan, and Street (2001) emphasized intercultural learning as a process that enabled people from different cultures to act as intercultural speakers using a shared language to communicate with each other in their everyday lives. Candlin (1989) maintained that intercultural learning was important to learners for enhancing intercultural skills, extending cultural knowledge and awareness as well as strengthening problem-solving abilities outside the classroom. Stier (2006) also pointed out that the process of intercultural learning was a part of education which could train a learner to cope with changes emotionally and operate efficiently in the encounter with both the target culture and the target language group. As intercultural learners need to cope with unavoidable changes in a process of cultural negotiation (Corbett, 2003), intercultural learning is also associated with the process of interaction with native

speakers in a particular linguistic and cultural context (Paige & Stringer, 1997). Such a learning process often provides active learners with many opportunities to learn the target language and culture (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 1999). According to Sercu (2000, p. 74), "The intercultural learning process can thus be described in terms of maintenance of integrity of identity, as a constant process of negotiation between what is own and what is foreign, what is part of one's identity and what is new and challenging". Indeed, intercultural learning enables learners to develop worldviews in which they can view their own cultures from the perspective of a world citizen (Bennet, 1993). As cross-cultural adaptation occurs in different forms, such as perceptions, attitudes, behavior patterns, language proficiency, communicative competence and cultural identity (Shi, 2006), the effects of intercultural learning which involves cultural negotiation and interpretation on one's cross-cultural adaptation might be explored from different aspects.

Two Dimensions of the Component in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

As the component in cross-cultural adaptation is often categorized into two dimensions according to one's reaction to the encounter with both the target culture and the target language group, the third perspective of this study originates from the notion that different dimensions in the component of cross-cultural adaptation may help to explain whether or not intercultural learning has an effect on cross-cultural adaptation among students studying abroad. In fact, no matter how cross-cultural adaptation is categorized, it usually involves either social or psychological dimension in its component. For example, Schumann (1978) pointed out that cross-cultural adaptation can be divided into social adaptation and psychological adaptation. The former is related to the development of sufficient contact with speakers of the target language, while the latter involves the process of growth in which one is psychologically open to the target language. Searle and Ward (1990) also categorized cross-cultural adaptation into psychological adaptation and socio-cultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation primarily refers to the feelings of well-being or satisfaction during the transition period of immersion in the host culture, whereas socio-cultural adaptation involves the ability to fit into the transitional occurring of the encounter with the host culture (Ward, Bochner, & Furham, 2001). According to Hammer (1992), both the psychological reactions to a new cultural environment and the social interaction and communication with native speakers indeed pose potential problems in cross-cultural adaptation for students studying abroad. While the extent of students' interaction with the hosts in a study abroad context is often limited (Freed, 1999; Ward et al., 2001; Barron, 2006), students studying abroad may more or less have social difficulties (Furnham & Bochner, 1982) and need more socio-cultural adaptation (Kennedy, 1999). More importantly, studies have found that students studying abroad often lack adequate awareness of the strategies in language and culture and do not make good use of learning opportunities they may have (Barron, 2006). This sheds light on the fact that intercultural learning may enable students to develop different learning strategies in daily life and be helpful to overcoming problems in two types of cross-cultural adaptation.

Method

This study adopted a questionnaire survey and was conducted in an English-speaking country. Firstly, length of residence abroad was hypothesized as the factor of predicting the degree, to which students studying abroad would experience intercultural learning. Secondly, it was hypothesized that cross-cultural adaptation was the factor that would be affected by intercultural learning and in turn became stronger with increased length of residence abroad. When the component of cross-cultural adaptation was considered to consist of two

types of cross-cultural adaptation (i.e., psychological adaptation and social adaptation), it was also hypothesized that two types of cross-cultural adaptation would be affected by intercultural learning and also become stronger with increased length of residence abroad.

Subjects

According to the enrolment information provided by a university in the United States, 150 questionnaires were distributed to EFL students coming from campus of the university in Asian countries. On hundred and forty-three questionnaires were returned at the rate of 95%. However, five questionnaires were found to be invalid because of subjects' nationalities. No missing value was then found in the other 138 valid questionnaires. While length of residence abroad was considered to predict the degree to which subjects experienced intercultural learning, subjects recruited for this study were divided into three groups according to the length of residence (i.e., more than two years, one to two years and less than one year).

Instrument and Procedure

The SPSS (statistical package of social science) was applied in this study to analyze the data collected from the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) were firstly performed to compare whether and how subjects were divided into three different groups responded differently in the dependent variable of cross-cultural adaptation. The same computation procedure was also completed to compare the responses to the variables of psychological adaptation and social adaptation among subjects in the three groups. The correlation test was then performed in order to examine whether or not the variables of psychological adaptation and social adaptation were correlated with each other. Although the questions of the questionnaire in this study were derived from standardized questionnaires, the reliability of the scales for the individual items was still empirically examined through reliability analysis.

Results and Discussions

When descriptive statistics through the computation of the SPSS was performed, the mean values showed that subjects in three groups responded differently (see Table 1). For example, the mean value was the highest with length of residence more than two years and became less with the length of residence one to two years. The mean value was the lowest with the length of residence less than one year. Such a message indicated that subjects' cross-cultural adaptation became stronger with increased length of residence. However, when one-way ANOVA (see Table 2) was also performed, it was found that there was no significant difference ($F = 1.736$; $P = 0.180$) in the responses to the variable of cross-cultural adaptation among subjects in three groups. Such results conveyed the message that subjects' cross-cultural adaptation did not significantly become stronger with increased length of residence abroad.

Table 1

Trends of Reponses in the Variable of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Variable (the length of residence)	*N*	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	95% confidence interval for mean	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
Less than one year	31	-17.1935	9.09366	1.63327	-20.5291	-13.8580
One to two years	41	-14.3659	7.74518	1.20959	-16.8105	-11.9212
More than two years	66	-14.0455	7.61866	0.93779	-15.0184	-12.1726

Table 2

Test of Differences in the Variables of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Variable	Sum of squares	Degree freedom	Mean square	*F*	*P*
(Adaptation)			111.295		
Between groups	222.690	2	64.098	1.736	0.180
Within groups	8653.215	135			
Total	8875.804	137			

Since cross-cultural adaptation was considered to consist of social adaptation and psychological adaptation, two types of cross-cultural adaptation were also examined through the same procedures according to the questions categorized into two types of cross-cultural adaptation. It was found that the responses to the variables of psychological adaptation and social adaptation followed two different trends. When descriptive statistics was performed, the mean values showed that subjects' responses to the variable of social adaptation became stronger with increased length of residence abroad (see Table 3). One-way ANOVA (see Table 4) was then performed and found that there were significant differences in the responses displayed among subjects in three groups ($F = 3.980$, $P = 0.021$).

Table 3

Trends of Responses in the Variable of Social Adaptation

Variable (the length of residence)	*N*	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	95% Confidence interval for mean	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
Less than one year	31	-2.9355	4.90534	0.88103	-4.7448	-1.1362
One to two years	41	-1.7317	3.89246	0.60790	-2.9603	-0.5031
More than two years	66	-0.4394	3.96185	0.48767	-1.4133	-0.5346

Table 4

Test of Differences in the Variable of Social Adaptation

Variable	Sum of squares	Degree freedom	Mean square	*F*	*P*
Between groups	138.468	2	69.234		
Within groups	2348.177	135	17.394	3.980	0.021*
Total	2486.645	137			

Note. $^{*}P < 0.05$.

However, when the same procedures were applied to examine the variable of psychological adaptation, the results were totally different. For instance, the mean value (see Table 5) shown in the variable of psychological adaptation fell down to the lowest with the length of residence less than one year, but it rose up to the highest with the length of residence one to two years. The mean value stayed in the middle with the length of residence more than two years. More importantly, the results of one-way ANOVA (see Table 6) found no significant difference in the responses to the variable of psychological adaptation ($F = 0.959$, $P = 0.386$).

Table 5

Trends of Responses in the Variable of Psychological Adaptation

Variable (The length of residence)	*N*	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	95% Confidence interval for mean	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
Less than one year	31	-18.2258	0.77989	0.85849	-19.9791	-16.4725
One to two years	41	-16.1707	0.53267	0.70788	-17.6014	-14.7400
More than two years	66	-17.4697	0.16291	0.51242	-18.4931	-16.4463

Table 6

Test of Differences in the Variable of Psychological Adaptation

Variable	Sum of squares	Degree freedom	Mean square	*F*	*P*
Between groups	80.460	2	15.113	0.959	0.386
Within groups	2714.123	135			
Total	2794.583	137	15.751		

Although there were different trends shown in the variables of both psychological adaptation and social adaptation, it was found that these two variables were significantly correlated with each other ($r = 0.615$, $P = 0.000$) through the correlation test (see Table 7). While proving the persuasive reliability of those questions categorized into the variable of cross-cultural adaptation (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = 0.789), the results of reliability analysis ensured the reliability of those questions categorized into the variables of social adaptation (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = 0.570) and psychological adaptation (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = 0.743).

Table 7

Test of Correlation in the Two Variables

Variables	*r*	*P*
Social adaptation*		0.000*
Psychological adaptation	0.615	

Note. * $P < 0.05$.

Implications and Suggestions

Although the results of this study show the trend that students studying abroad respond differently in their cross-cultural adaption and their responses also become stronger with increased length of residence abroad, it is found that no significant difference is shown in such responses among students in three groups. It indicates that there is no significant measurable effect of length of residence abroad on the strength of cross-cultural adaptation. Thus, it can be argued that how strong students' cross-cultural adaptation seems not easy to be predicted by a single factor, such as length of residence abroad. The researcher maintains that the development of cross-cultural adaptation may vary with personal efforts at different stages and in turn cannot be predicted simply by length of residence abroad.

When cross-cultural adaptation is considered to involve two dimensions in its component, the results of this study show that there indeed exist different trends toward the responses to two types of cross-cultural adaptation. It is found that the responses to the variable of social adaptation shown among students in three groups significantly become stronger with increased length of residence abroad. However, those to the variable of psychological adaptation are not found to follow this trend. For example, the mean value shown in the variable of psychological adaptation falls down to the lowest with the length of residence less than one year, but it rises up to the highest with the length of residence one to two years. The mean value keeps in-between with the length of residence more than two years. This message implies that students studying abroad for one to two years might have the fewest problems in psychological adaptation but those who had been studying abroad for less than one year could have the most problems in psychological adaptation. More importantly, no significant difference was found in students' responses to the variable of psychological adaptation. From this point, the researcher argues that psychological adaptation can be controlled by students themselves due to the

involvement of their emotions or feelings and emphasizes that students may have different situations in their psychological adaptation at different stages. However, while finding that one's social adaptation can significantly become stronger with increased length of residence abroad, the researcher argues that this type of cross-cultural adaption may be developed gradually through intercultural learning during the period of immersion in the target culture. Although the variables of social adaptation and psychological adaptation are found to be different from each other, it is also found that they are significantly correlated with one another. The researcher thus argues that one type of cross-cultural adaptation may be easily influenced by the other and suggests that the effects of intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation need to be explored from different dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation respectively.

Conclusions

While more and more students in the 21st are studying abroad due to the trend towards globalization and internationalization, they may more or less experience intercultural learning as a consequence of communication and interaction with native speakers using English as a shared language in daily life. Since intercultural learning is unavoidable for students studying abroad, the researcher echoes the perspective of other researchers that such a learning process can be viewed as a part of education outside the classroom and emphasizes that the way in which students adapt to the target culture is indeed affected by intercultural learning in a study abroad context. However, as the results of this study find that there exist either significant or insignificant differences in students' responses to two types of cross-cultural adaptation, it can be concluded that, due to the complex component of cross-cultural adaptation, the effects of intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation among students studying abroad should be explored from two dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation respectively. According to the findings, social adaptation is more predictable than psychological adaptation. The researcher also concludes that it might be easier to trace the effects of intercultural learning from social adaptation. Although it is found that psychological adaptation and social adaptation are different from each other, they are also found to be closely linked to one another. The researcher further concludes that one type of cross-cultural adaptation may be influenced by the other and emphasizes that the close relationship between psychological adaptation and social adaptation plays a role in reflecting the effects of intercultural learning on cross-cultural adaptation among students studying abroad.

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