

FOREIGN STUDENTS' CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT AND COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract-The study analyzed the cultural adjustment and coping strategies of Timorese, Nepalese and Indians, and Koreans enrolled at Tarlac State University (TSU) during the school year 2007-09 in Tarlac. The qualitative research design via case analysis was utilized as the method of investigating the problems encountered by these foreign students. The students were selected by purposive sampling. After thorough interview with the subjects, using an interview schedule as a tool, problems in the cultural adjustment were identified. The cultural adjustments that were dealt with by the students from East Timor, Nepal, and Korea were eating habits (these groups are fond of extremely spicy food), hygiene practices (like frequent bathing and changing of clothes). In their schooling, the most common problem was their inability to understand the lessons in language foreign to them or in accent different from theirs. In religion, the conflict was when they compromised their belief to their host country's belief. Homesickness was so much of a source of sadness. The Timorese, Nepalese and Indians could hardly intermingle with other students because of their odor which Filipino students found hard to take. The Koreans found the hot climate in the Philippines a pressing problem. The coping strategies used by the students were: adaptation to the conditions at TSU (to include food, clothing, and lodging), compromise, prayerfulness, constant communication with family and friends, and intermingling with the students by sports activities. The Koreans used their economic advantage to enjoy their stay in the country, while the Timorese had better conditions here than at home.

Keywords-cultural adjustment, coping strategies and foreign students

I. INTRODUCTION

Students experience a wide range of emotions once they leave home to study abroad. It is important for parents to understand what their child is going through, to be patient and supportive while their child adjusts to the new culture.

Foreign students, just like any visitors to a foreign country, must deal with cultural differences and make adjustments [1]. Adjustment is an on-going process demanded by one situation and then another. It does not happen overnight [2]. At first, it was characterized by fascination, elation, and optimism [3]. After this stage, the foreign student will be struggling with the tremendous challenges presented by an unfamiliar environment, a foreign

culture, and a different language. While some might be delighted with the new culture, most students may experience language difficulties [2]. When problems mount up, they are likely to experience the second stage of adjustment. Frustration comes when dealing with bureaucratic matters and the weariness of speaking and listening to an alien language every day. Students react to this frustration by rejecting the new environment in which they feel discomfort [5].

The students blame their external environment for their bad feelings. Some of these hostilities are translated into anger over minor frustrations, fear and mistrust of locals, absenteeism from class, lack of interest, lack of motivation, and, at worst, complete withdrawal. Academic problems may begin at this stage.

The adjustment stage follows when the student begins to relax in a new situation and begins to laugh at minor mistakes and misunderstandings, which, in the hostility stage, would have caused major headaches. Saljo and Wyndhamn [6] and Corsini [7] defined this as the psychological process through which people manage and cope with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

The last stage is when the adjustment is as complete as possible, anxiety is largely gone, and the new customs are accepted and enjoyed [4]. As a student gets used to the host country's ways, things that seemed like a "crisis" may now simply be seen as different ways of doing things. Most students gradually adjust their lifestyles to be balanced with a country's own cultural norms [3].

How these foreign students adjust in their environment merit a study, because in the Philippines, highly noticeable is the influx of foreign students in Colleges and Universities. The number of foreign students in the Philippines increases every year.

At Tarlac State University alone, a group of Nepalese stayed for almost two years to get a Medical Course. Some of them enrolled at the College of Nursing; about four Chinese nationals enrolled their MA units in English while one took MBA; and regularly, Korean students stayed at the TSU hostel to take their English proficiency or the Christian Education courses.

In this study the researcher investigated on the cultural adjustments and coping mechanisms of foreign students at Tarlac State University.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study aimed to reveal the cultural difficulties and coping strategies of foreign students enrolled at TSU and to provide necessary intervention to help the students become active and effective participants inside the classroom.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- A. *In what aspect of the students' stay at tsu did they find difficulty?*
- B. *How did the foreign students adjust to the culture of their host school?*
- C. *What strategies did they use to cope?*

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study relied on interviews with different groups of students. First, the Nepalese students who stayed in the University during the School year 2007 to 2008 were interviewed and observed. There were 18 of them. The East Timor students were housed at the Lucinda Campus from January to May 2009 before the beginning of their collegiate studies. There were 109 of them. The Korean students regularly come for short term courses in the university.

The researcher frequently interviewed these students on matter of cultural adjustment in terms of food, health habits, relationship with Filipino students and their studies.

The researcher, being one of the teachers assigned to the Korean students, observed and saw how they did their adjustment.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the transcript of the cases, the answers to the specific problems in the study were derived. These are presented according to the subtitles that represent the specific problems.

A. *The Difficulties Encountered by Foreign Students*

This portion presents various difficulties encountered by the foreign students during their stay at TSU. It is very important to identify the variables in order to answer and analyze the objective of this study.

a. *Food*

Because of the geographical proximities of the Nepal and India, students from these countries have a lot of similarities. First was the food. Their food is heavily mixed with variety of spices which is opposite the Filipino style of preparing their food. As South Asians with freezing climate, the spices in their food help their body heat requirements sustain during cold whether. As a tropical country, most Filipinos are not passionate with spicy food except for selected menus.

The students from East Timor, having originated from a poor country, are fond of vegetables, even not garnished. Being poor, they have been exposed to simple and meager provisions. As government scholars, they felt more gratified.

Koreans are adapted to green and spicy food. While they bring bottled spices and wrappers for certain food, what they have back home was in dearth in their host school.

Generally, East, South and Southeast Asian students' food is spicy. They found the carnivorous eating habit of the Filipinos quite extraordinary because they are mostly vegetarians.

b. *Hygiene*

Culturally, the foreign and transient students of the University experienced different adjustments as far as the local climate is concerned. It was observed that almost all of the foreign and transient students whether coming from East, South and Southeast Asia could hardly cope with the contemporary Filipino health habits, taking a bath or even shower during cold temperature. Hence, it was a problem when they came to the Philippines to study.

As they are not accustomed to the weather, the spicy food that they take becomes obvious to their smell. Although they were unconscious of this nature, they felt irritated when Filipino students covered their noses when they pass in front of them.

No one among the foreign students was exempted from experiencing culture shock. Since most of these students came from different parts of Asia, adjustment was always a preliminary problem.

c. *Religion*

Nepal and India are predominantly Buddhist countries with only a small number of Christians. In the absence of Buddhist services, they come to other religious services. This is a problem that students had to face.

d. *Fashion*

It is to be understood that Timor was only starting its new life as an independent state. Hence, the students were extremely simple in dressing and fashion and were mostly contented with what was given to them. This made them different.

Nepalese, Indians and East Timorese were not conscious about fashionable clothes and shoes. They wore simple clothes enough to dress themselves. They found fashionable clothes expensive on their part because their allowances were good enough for their board and lodging and other necessities which they needed for their studies. Thus, they appeared awkward to the Filipino students who groomed themselves as westerns.

e. *Separation from Home*

Being away from their families is one of the difficult adjustments of the foreign students. While in the Philippines, they had no immediate families to convey their needs and problems. The feeling of homesickness is one problem that was difficult to overcome.

f. *Mode of Transportation*

Korean students and missionaries own beautiful automobiles back home. When they stay in Tarlac, they find riding on jeepneys and tricycles enjoyable, yet, uncomfortable. Because there are none like these in highly developed countries, they take them without remorse.

g. *Relationship with other students*

Korean students found it hard to mingle with Filipino students because their interpreters narrowed down their access to conversation.

Students from Nepal, India and East Timor speak English well minus their accent and some vocabularies which make conversation vague and difficult. With their English skills, their relationship with other students and instructors was easier.

East Timor students found it very difficult to relate with Filipino students during their initial stay in the country. While most Filipino students are particularly concerned with their hygiene, the East Timor students felt inadequate and insecure when they were evaded by their counterparts allegedly due to various reasons.

h. Climate

The Koreans find the hot climate in the Philippines as their pressing problem. Korea has a generally cool climate; the heat of the sun during summer in the Philippines is the common problem.

i. School Related Factors

The medium of instruction, pedagogical techniques, instructional focus and classroom interaction are school related factors which greatly affected the students' academic and social performance.

- Medium of Instruction

Korean and Chinese students come to the Philippines to learn English; hence, it takes time before they could interact with their Filipino teachers, friends and acquaintances. To Koreans who were basically zero in both verbal and non-verbal English language, the interaction was almost impossible. Even to the Nepalese, who were already English speaking, found it hard to understand the accent and pronunciation of their teachers.

Most Christian missionary students could hardly speak English; hence, this is their biggest adjustment problem during classroom discussions. Lessons relied much on how well the lessons were interpreted.

- Pedagogical Techniques of Teachers

Teaching strategies vary from course program, age and type of students.

Foreign students who were enrolled in regular degree programs were required to comply with the requirements set forth on the syllabi of the instructors and professors. Like any regular student, foreign students are equally treated inside the classroom.

Filipino professors and instructors teach with thoroughness and seriousness. Most teachers teach with standard strictness and quickness without regard to the foreign students' nationalities. Since most teachers do not make adjustments in their methodologies, the foreign students find their teachers' style a problem.

B. Cultural Adjustments and coping Strategies

- Koreans

Koreans learn to appreciate almost all of the foods which the university offers them including those served in restaurants and fast food centers. The Koreans easily become accustomed to the food served by the Filipino host.

Teachers help their students adjust. Individual and group activities are strategies that are appreciated by the Korean

missionary students. Group singing of worship and praise songs in Korean and English are also workable. This strategy used by their teachers makes them feel close to home.

Koreans adapted and intermingled with other students of their age. Koreans match themselves with the Timorese and other group of students in sports.

Korean students are more affluent than any of their counterparts; they could easily buy the luxuries they need which helped them adjust.

- Nepalese, Indians and Timorese

The students from Nepal and India were supported by their parents. Because of their economic advantage, they could easily adjust to their everyday challenges.

To the Timorese, what is ordinary menu to the Filipino students is special to them. Timorese students are subsidized by the government. Because of this, they easily adapted themselves with what they considered blessing. They are devout Christians. They come down from their dormitory which is four kilometers from the highway just to attend church service. When they pray they are ardent and quiet. The students' faith in God helps them overcome their insecurities, helplessness and homesickness.

Students from Nepal and India adopted the fashion for good dressing and hygiene practices of the Filipino students to get accepted and to gain friends. The same thing happened to the East Timorese.

Like the Koreans, the Timorese constantly played soccer. Being into sports helped them gain friends.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

- The most common difficulty of foreign students coming to the Philippines is the adjustment to the food and hygiene practices of the Filipinos. It is shocking for the students to find their Filipino students dislike them because of their smell which is caused by the food they eat and their hygiene practices.
- Being homesick is a problem of the Nepalese, Indians and East Timorese.
- Only the Koreans were extremely affected by the hot climate in the Philippines because their economic country's condition is different.
- The language is a barrier. It takes time before these foreign students get used to the accent of the English speaking Filipino teachers.
- Foreign students can easily adapt to the Filipino culture because the food is good in taste minus the spice and Filipinos are normally friendly, easy to go with, and happy go lucky.
- The hot and humid climate in the Philippines taught the students to bath frequently because it will make them feel better.
- The students' religiosity and prayerfulness helped them adjust easily. However, the Nepalese and the

Indians had to compromise their religion with what is practiced here in the Philippines.

- The economic advantage of the Koreans makes all recreation facilities and means accessible to them.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings, the following are recommended:

- Cultural education must be thoroughly provided to the students while still in their country of origin. Movies, documentaries, seminars and orientations must be provided to the prospective students before coming to their host country.
- A Center to educate and acculturate foreign students with regard Philippine culture and education must be created to help students understand the existing conditions or environment of their host institutions.
- Each college or university must set up an Office for International Affairs. It shall take charge of all the activities and strategies that will assist and guide the foreign students about the social, cultural, educational, political and spiritual environments in the local setting and entire country.

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