

Effectiveness of an Adaptation Video Viewed by Chinese Students Before Coming to Study in the UK

EFFICACITÉ D'UNE ADAPTATION VIDÉO VUE PAR LES ÉTUDIANTS CHINOIS AVANT QU'ILS AILLENT FAIRE LEURS ÉTUDES AU ROYAUME-UNI

Yuefang ZHOU¹

John Todman

Abstract:

Aim: A pilot study was carried out to investigate the effectiveness of viewing a video discussion for preparing Chinese students for postgraduate study in the UK.

Methods: While still in China, 52 Chinese students were shown a video of a discussion among Chinese students in the UK about what studying in the UK is like. The students in China were shown the video five months before they commenced postgraduate studies in the UK. The students who participated in the video discussion had themselves been studying in the UK for at least six months. Before and after viewing the video, the students in China completed a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire about their expectations of differences between teaching and learning in China and the UK. There was also a follow-up evaluation questionnaire that the students completed after they had been studying for three months in the UK. This elicited their views about the usefulness of the video and suggestions for improving it.

Results: After viewing the video, students expected bigger differences between teaching and learning in the UK than before they had viewed the video. In the follow-up evaluation, they reported that the video had been helpful in preparing them for study in the UK, and they suggested ways in which the video could be made more helpful.

Conclusions: The pre-departure video approach has potential for assisting in the adaptation of Chinese students studying in a different culture and the suggestions for improvement should be noted by future adaptation video producers.

¹ Bute Medical School, University of St Andrews St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9TS Scotland, UK
E-mail: yz10@st-andrews.ac.uk

* Received 15 December 2008; accepted 10 July 2009.

Key words: Chinese students; cultural adaptation; cultural expectations; international students; video

Résumé:

Objectif: Une étude pilote a été réalisée pour étudier l'efficacité de visionner une vidéo pour la préparation des étudiants chinois qui vont faire leurs études supérieures au Royaume-Uni.

Méthodes: Alors qu'ils étaient encore en Chine, 52 étudiants chinois ont vu une vidéo d'une discussion entre des étudiants chinois au Royaume-Uni sur ce que les études au Royaume-Uni étaient. Les étudiants en Chine ont vu cette vidéo cinq mois avant qu'ils aient commencé les études de troisième cycle au Royaume-Uni. Les étudiants qui avaient participé à la discussion dans cette vidéo avaient fait eux-mêmes des études au Royaume-Uni pendant au moins six mois. Avant et après avoir vu la vidéo, les étudiants en Chine ont fait un pré- et post-intervention questionnaire sur leurs attentes de différences entre l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de la Chine et du Royaume-Uni. Il y avait aussi un suivi de questionnaire d'évaluation que les étudiants ont complété après trois mois d'études au Royaume-Uni. Ainsi, on a obtenu leurs avis sur l'utilité de la vidéo et des suggestions pour l'améliorer.

Résultats: Après avoir visionné la vidéo, les étudiants attendaient des différences plus grandes entre l'enseignement et l'apprentissage au Royaume-Uni. Dans le suivi d'évaluation, ils ont signalé que la vidéo a été utile dans la préparation pour leurs études au Royaume-Uni et ils ont suggéré certaines manières pour rendre la vidéo plus utile.

Conclusions: La vidéo avant le départ a le potentiel pour aider les étudiants chinois à s'adapter aux études dans une autre culture et leurs suggestions d'amélioration devraient être notées par les futurs producteurs de l'adaptation vidéo.

Mots-Clés: étudiants chinois; adaptation culturelle; exceptions culturelles; étudiants internationaux; vidéo

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, as the number of Chinese postgraduate students studying in UK universities has increased, the adaptation problems of this population have received much attention (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), partly because successful resolutions to the adaptation problems of these students are likely to be associated with satisfactory teaching and learning outcomes. Moreover, the identification and analysis of international students' problems are seen by university administrators as means of improving service provision. One conclusion from research in this area is that many learning-related problems of Chinese students studying in UK universities arise from a mismatch of the educational expectations of Chinese students and UK teachers (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Durkin, 2004). Research on ways of bridging the gap between the mismatch of cultural expectations is now urgently needed (Zhou & Todman, in press).

Brief Literature Review of Cross-Cultural Educational Expectations

As the number of international students from China studying in UK universities has been increasing during the last 10 years, a number of researchers have made comparisons between the UK and Chinese educational systems, and how Chinese students in the UK adapt to UK ways of teaching and learning. For example, Durkin (2004) found that many academic problems arose from the different educational expectations of Chinese students and UK teachers. For example, independent thinking and critical

evaluation are highly encouraged in UK education, but dependence on authority and assumed acceptance are commonly expected in the Chinese educational tradition. These mismatched expectations are likely to result in dissatisfying classroom encounters (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

Among the discussions that have taken place, Cortazzi and Jin's (1997) proposal for "communication for learning across cultures" seems particularly pertinent. They proposed a process of cultural synergy, requiring mutual efforts from both (UK) teachers and (Chinese) students to understand one another's culture to bridge the gap of the mismatched expectations.

A pre-departure video approach

Another way of dealing with this mismatch might be to introduce Chinese students to the UK approach to teaching and learning before they come to study in the UK by exposing them to discussions among Chinese students who have already had successful adaptation experiences in the UK. This approach was explored in a pilot study in which a group of Chinese students in China watched a video discussion among Chinese students already studying in the UK. The goal was to familiarize the students in China with some key aspects of what they should expect when studying in the UK. For example, they would learn that they would be expected to acquire problem-solving skills and information-search skills. It is possible that increased awareness of such expectations would help them to prepare for their future study in the UK and result in their being less "shocked" on arrival in the new teaching and learning environment.

The study involved collaboration between the first author, who was carrying out PhD research on the adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK, and staff teaching Chinese postgraduate students at the University of Abertay Dundee, who were concerned to improve the pre-arrival preparation of Chinese students. Whilst it was the practical concerns of the university staff that made an intervention study in China possible, the practical considerations also imposed constraints on the design of the study. It was not possible to establish a control group, with random allocation to the treatment and control groups, which would have permitted a "true" experimental design, such as a pretest-posttest control group design (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Instead, it was necessary to resort to a one-group pretest-posttest design, which is classified as a pre-experimental design by Campbell and Stanley because of the numerous threats to internal validity inherent in this design.

Another practical constraint was that the intervention had several components. The independent variable of theoretical interest was the video presentation, but this was preceded by an introductory talk and followed by discussion and clarification of points arising from the video, which meant that any effects of the intervention as a whole could not be attributed unequivocally to the impact of the video.

Although the design of the intervention study is less than satisfactory, consistent with Campbell & Stanley's (1966, p.7) position that it is "worth doing where nothing better can be done", we take the view that, provided extreme caution is exercised in the interpretation of results, a pilot study of this kind may have value in suggesting whether or not a subsequent study using a more satisfactory design might be worth pursuing.

Aims of the study

There were two main aims in conducting this video intervention: The first is to look for indications of changes in the students' awareness of differences between teaching and learning in China and the UK; The second is to collect students' views about the usefulness of the video and how supports of this kind might be made more effective.

METHODS

Participants

Students in China. Fifty-two students at Nanchang University in China, a partner university of the University of Abertay Dundee, participated. These students were due to come in five months time to the University of Abertay Dundee for postgraduate studies. Of these, 26 were coming to join an Information Technology (IT) course and 26 were coming to join a Software Engineering (SE) course. Forty-five of the students completed both pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. Of these, 23 were IT students (13 male and 10 female) and 22 were SE students (15 male and 7 female). Twenty-eight of these students also completed a follow-up evaluation questionnaire.

Students in the video. Five Chinese students (three male postgraduates, one female postgraduate and one male postdoctoral student) who had been studying at the University of Abertay Dundee for at least six months, participated in a discussion about how studying in UK universities differs from studying in China, and the discussion was video recorded. There is evidence that when a facilitator shares some similar life experiences with the participants, the discussion may be more open if the facilitator participates in the discussion (De Andrade, 2000). For this reason, as well as for her theoretical knowledge about student adaptation problems, the first author, being Chinese and having experienced postgraduate study in the UK, acted as a participant facilitator during the discussion. The students in the video discussion had studied on the same IT and SE courses on which the students in Nanchang University in China were preparing to study.

Instruments

Video discussion. The video discussion, which involved collaboration between the first author and the Nanchang collaborative program leaders at the University of Abertay, was to be used for both teaching and research purposes. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Abertay for the video to be used for research purposes. Following discussion among three Nanchang program leaders and the first author about the main topics that would feature in the video discussion and the arrangements for video recording, the discussion took place in the video conference room at the University of Abertay. Two of the Nanchang program leaders from the University of Abertay videoed the discussion, which lasted about 45 minutes.

The discussion, which was in English, was facilitated by the first author, who used a discussion guideline specifying the topics to be addressed and endeavored to elicit as many examples of personal experiences as possible. The discussion guideline specified three topics: (1) what western styles of teaching and learning were like, based on the students' own experiences of studying at the University of Abertay, (2) how studying in the UK differed from studying in China, based on the surprises and difficulties the students encountered while studying at the University of Abertay and (3) the students' individual ways of coping with and adapting to the new learning environment, together with advice for Chinese students intending to come to the UK.

The video discussion was preceded by about ten minutes of free-ranging chat to allow participants to relax and get to know one another. At the start of the video discussion, the participants introduced themselves, saying who they were, when they came to the UK and what they had studied and were studying. Then the facilitator gave a brief introduction to the purpose and scope of the discussion, followed by the discussion proper. Finally, some minor editing of the video was carried out by the program leaders to ensure a good quality for viewing.

Pre and post questionnaires. Equivalent four-item pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were designed to assess whether there were any changes in the students' awareness of differences between teaching and learning in China and the UK from before to after viewing the video. The questionnaires, which were based on the content of the video discussion, contained, first, a general statement about teaching and learning differences between China and the UK (Item 1: "Teaching and learning in the UK and China will be similar"). The following three items addressed difficulties of studying in the UK, focusing on English language difficulties, different educational expectations and adaptations that would be necessary (e.g., Item 4: "In order to succeed in the UK, I will need to change my study methods from depending on clear guidance to developing independent thinking"). The questionnaires were in English, with Chinese language translations also provided. Students were asked to give their views on a six-point scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). In view of indications that there is a strong tendency for this population to avoid extreme values (e.g., *totally agree*) on scales of this kind (Zhou, Y., 2006), the neutral point, *I neither agree nor disagree*, was omitted in order to oblige participants to come down on one side or the other.

Follow-up evaluation questionnaire. A questionnaire to be administered three months after coming to the UK was designed to explore whether the students thought the video was helpful over time. The first item, which required a response on a six-point scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*), was about the general helpfulness of the video discussion. The next four items, asked whether (*yes* or *no* responses) the video was helpful in specific ways (i.e., knowing more about what to expect; possible difficulties; how to deal with difficulties; being better prepared). Students were also invited to give specific examples for each of items 2-5 and to indicate any other ways in which they found the video helpful. This questionnaire also sought student views about how the video might be improved. The questionnaire requested *yes/no* responses to five suggested improvements (i.e., including UK teachers in the video discussion; including home students and/or other international students; videoing classroom interactions; videoing other aspects of study life such as visiting the library, the computer laboratory and meeting supervisors; videoing aspects of leisure such as sports activities). Finally, students were asked to suggest other ways in which the video could be made more helpful.

Procedure

Two of the Nanchang program leaders presented the video and administered the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires to the 52 Nanchang students in China during an annual visit to prepare the students for their studies in the UK. Following the delivery of a general introduction to studying in the UK and to the video research project, the two Abertay staff distributed copies of the pre-intervention questionnaire and collected them when they were completed. The next day, the students were shown the video, and this was followed by some discussion led by the program leaders. The students then completed the post-intervention questionnaire, which was collected on the same day or the day following. The follow-up evaluation questionnaire was administered to those students in the Nanchang group who responded to a request to complete the questionnaire three months after their arrival in the UK ($n = 28$).

RESULTS

Pre- and Post-Intervention Questionnaires

Preliminary analyses. Factor analysis of the pre and post questionnaire data, using principal components extraction and varimax rotation, did not reveal any clear factorial structure. In addition, reliability analyses gave no indication of unitary (internally consistent) scales. The coefficients of consistency for the four items were Alpha = 0.07 for the pre-intervention questionnaire and Alpha = 0.05 for the post-intervention questionnaire. This meant that subsequent analyses needed to be conducted on individual items, for which an approximation to equal interval data could not be assumed. Therefore, the ratings were regarded as ordinal data and non-parametric analyses were used.

Median values. Median ratings for items on both pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were generally high (*Median* = 5), which suggests that students had high expectations of China-UK differences both before and after the intervention. The median values for ratings on Item 2, which referred to expectations about difficulties arising from English language, were somewhat lower (*Median* = 3 for both pre and post), which suggests that students were only slightly inclined to agree that English language would be a big problem.

Pre-post differences. For each of the four items, the change from pre-intervention to post-intervention ratings was tested using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. For Item 1, which asked about expected general differences in teaching and learning in the UK, expectation of differences increased significantly from pre- to post-intervention, $T(N = 23) = 27.0, p < .001$. Expectations also increased significantly from pre- to post- intervention for Item 2 (expected language difficulties), $T(N = 27) = 102.5, p < .05$ and Item 4 (expected need to adapt study methods), $T(N = 22) = 67.0, p < .05$. There was no significant change in expectations for Item 3 (expected requirement to be more independent and creative), $T(N = 25) = 139.5, p > .05$.

Follow-Up Evaluation Questionnaire

Item 1: general helpfulness of the video discussion. The majority of the 28 students who completed this questionnaire after three months in the UK were positive about the helpfulness of the video (*Median* = 5). Of the 28 students, 93% agreed (7% *totally agree*, 50% *agree*, 36% *slightly agree*) that the video had been helpful in their preparation for study in the UK. It was noted earlier that there is a strong tendency for this population to avoid extreme values such as *totally agree*, so the relative infrequency of *totally agree* responses to the general helpfulness statement does not necessarily imply a low level of perceived helpfulness, especially as the median value of the ratings was 5.

Items 2-5: aspects of helpfulness. Table 1 gives the percentage of students who agreed that the video had been helpful in particular ways. For each of these aspects of helpfulness, the table also summarizes students' responses to the request to give specific examples of ways in which the video had been helpful, and provides some typical examples of their responses.

[Table 1 about here]

Students were also asked to indicate other ways in which they thought the video had been helpful. Two new aspects of usefulness emerged. These were (1) they learned that the whole experience of studying in the UK could be valuable in their future lives, and (2) they became more aware that there would be a mix of enjoyments and difficulties.

Items 6-10: Improvements to the video. Table 2 shows the percentage of students who agreed with five pre-defined aspects of potential improvement of the video.

[Table 2 about here]

In addition, students were asked for additional suggestions to make the video more helpful. There were four distinctive suggestions. These were:

- video to include preparations in China
- video to include more typical examples of difficulties involved in studying and living in the UK, including showing what appropriate preparations could be made in China
- focus of video should be on real life scenes, such as what a typical UK tutorial would be like – student discussions based on these should be supplementary
- could use Mandarin if the audience is Chinese – might create a more relaxed atmosphere

DISCUSSION

Methodological Limitations

In interpreting the results of the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, it is essential to recall the vulnerability of the design to confounds, such as history, maturation or testing effects (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Thus, the increases from pre- to post-intervention found for expectations of general differences, language difficulties and need to adapt study methods may have been due to exposure to the video or to the effects of confounded variables. For example, informal discussions that may have taken place among students between the pre-intervention questionnaire and the intervention (a “history” confound) or the effect of sensitization to the issue by exposure to the pretest itself (a “testing” confound) could provide alternative explanations of the obtained differences.

Another design issue that must be confronted is the fact that the independent variable of interest (the video presentation) was only part of the intervention. The full intervention comprised an introduction to studying in the UK delivered by two UK staff, followed by the video and finally an open discussion. It follows that any changes that occurred from pre- to post-intervention (or the absence of change) may have been due to any mix of the three components of the intervention. Thus, the significant increase in the expectation that teaching and learning in the UK would be different from that in China (Item 1) may have been attributable, at least in part, to the non-video components of the intervention. Also, in the event of there being no significant change (e.g., Item 3), it remains possible that the video had an effect in one direction that was cancelled by an opposite effect of one or both of the other intervention components.

Effect of the Intervention

It seems that the students in China already had quite high expectations of teaching and learning differences between China and the UK, but their expectations of most differences still increased after the intervention, the exception being expectations regarding a requirement to be more independent and creative. The changes in expectations that occurred from before to after the intervention were in the direction of the students becoming more aware of China-UK differences, suggesting that they had gained new knowledge. For the reasons discussed above, however, the source of new knowledge cannot be unequivocally attributed to the video.

Perceptions of Helpfulness of the Video

Responses to Item 1 of the follow-up evaluation questionnaire indicated a high level of agreement that the video had been helpful in a general sense. Responses to Items 2-5 (see Table 1) revealed a number of specific ways that students found the video helpful, including two that had not been suggested to them (value of the experience in later life and awareness of a probable mix of enjoyments and difficulties). The relatively low percentage (32%) of students who found the video helpful with respect to dealing with difficulties suggests that there should be a stronger focus on solutions.

Suggested Improvements to the Video

Responses to Items 6-10 of the follow-up questionnaire (see Table 2) suggested some other ways in which students thought that the video might be improved. They tended to agree with most of the specific suggestions for broadening the scope of the video, and their relative lack of endorsement (29%) of the

“leisure life” (Item 10) suggestion increases confidence that they were not simply agreeing with everything. The students also made a number of interesting suggestions of their own, which deserve careful consideration by future producers of adaptation support videos.

Future Research

The design limitations of this study have been acknowledged, but sufficient findings, particularly the qualitative findings, have emerged to support the view that the approach taken in this pilot study is worth pursuing with an improved video and within a more rigorous design. For example, an extension of a pretest-posttest control group design, in which the treatment might be (1) video alone, (2) live introduction/discussion, or (3) video + live introduction/discussion, would potentially provide internally valid information about the relative effects of the different components of the intervention as it was implemented in the current study. A schematic illustration of the proposed design is shown in Figure 1.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this pilot study have suggested that the pre-departure video approach has great potential for helping smooth the adaptation process of Chinese postgraduate students studying in a different culture. Suggestions for video improvement, particularly ways of broadening the scope of the video, deserve careful consideration of future producers of adaptation support videos. The approach taken in this pilot study is worth pursuing for future researchers with a more rigorous research design. Future research is also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs of this kind that aim to prepare international students before they enter into a culturally new teaching and learning environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Nanchang program staff at the University of Abertay Dundee for their collaboration in the production and presentation of the video.

REFERENCES

- Campbell, D.T. & Stanley, J.C. (1966). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Co.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1997). Communication for learning across cultures. In D. McNamara & R. Harris (Eds.). *Overseas students in higher education* (pp. 76-90). London: Routledge.
- De Andrade, L.L. (2004). Negotiating form the inside: constructing racial and ethnic identity in qualitative research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnology*, 29, 268-290.
- Durkin, K. (2004). Challenges Chinese students face in adapting to academic expectations and teaching/learning styles of UK masters courses, and how cross cultural understanding and adequate support might aid them to adapt. Abstract retrieved on March 1, 2008, from <http://www.britishcouncil.org/china-education-scholarships-china-studies-grant-awardlist-kathydurkin.pdf>
- Spencer-Oatey, H. & Xiong, Z. (2006). Chinese students' psychological and sociocultural adjustments to Britain: an empirical study. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. 19, 37-53.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of culture shock (2nd ed.)*. Hove: Routledge.

- Zhou, Y. (2006). *Processes of cultural pedagogical shock and adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland.
- Zhou, Y. & Todman, J. (2008). Chinese students in the UK: A two-way reciprocal adaptation. *Journal of International & Intercultural Communication*, 1 (3), 221-243.

TABLES

Table 1. Percentage of Students Agreeing With Aspects of Helpfulness in Items 2-5

Item (aspect of helpfulness)	Percentage (<i>n</i> = 28)	Summary of what was learned with examples
Item 2: knowing more about what to expect	75%	UK teaching and learning styles and what students were expected to do in the UK • Learn independently (including reading critically, time management and goal setting) • Lots of group work and tutorials etc. • Lots of student-teacher interaction
Item 3: knowing more about possible difficulties	68%	Difficulties in social life and difficulties relating to study life, particularly becoming independent learners • Different learning strategies • Managing time • Communicating with supervisors etc. • Reading academic books and articles • Making friends with home students
Item 4: knowing more about how to deal with difficulties	32%	Strategies for dealing with language, communication and study problems • Use more English in and after class • Approach UK teachers more actively • Not being afraid of difficulties and being prepared to solve them using own ability • Ask for help from more experienced Chinese students
Item 5: how to be better prepared	57%	Better prepared for different study and life situations • Prepare language • Prepare psychologically for the difference • Prepare computer skills as well as academic subject knowledge

Table 2. Percentage of Students Agreeing With Aspects of Improvement in Items 6-10

Item (aspect of improvement)	Percentage (n = 28)
Item 6: Including UK teachers in the discussion to talk about their experiences working with Chinese students and their expectations about teaching and learning	75%
Item 7: Including home students and/or other international students in the discussion to talk about non-Chinese students' experiences studying with Chinese students, such as team work	50%
Item 8: Videoing some teaching and learning periods in real classroom settings, such as tutorials, group discussions and presentations	79%
Item 9: Videoing some other aspects of study life in the UK, such as in the library, in the computer laboratory and when meeting supervisors	57%
Item 10: By videoing some aspects of leisure life in the UK, such as sports activities	29%

FIGURE

Figure 1

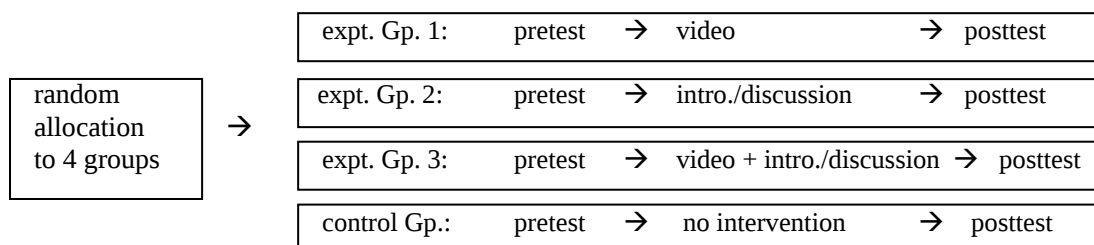


Figure 1. Schematic illustration of a valid experimental design to investigate the effect of a video intervention on international students' expectations about studying abroad.

Editor: Hadrian G. Djajadikerta