Case Study: A Chinese Student at a Sino-Western University in China

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Abstract

Many more Chinese families choose to send their children to Sino-Western Universities in China, but many are not aware of the challenges students may face when adapting to cultural differences and education norms in a western context. This leads to unfavorable learning experience of the students and brings many challenges to teachers at these universities. This article will analyse a typical case of a Chinese student Fen at a Sino-British University in China. Before entering college, Fen was a top student in the class. After entering the university, she could not adapt to the western education system and could not manage and control her time well. Fen became self-abased, self-abandoned and conservative. Her grades plummeted, and eventually she lost interest in learning. The author hopes to provide reference ideas for educators and help students like Fen to adapt to the Western education system. Perhaps it can also give parents some insights about the western education norms, and so make wise university choices.

Keywords

Cultural differences, educational norms, challenges

1. The Case of Fen

Fen is a Chinese student at a Sino-British University based in China who was at the top of her high school class before entering the university. Like most high school students, she had a strict schedule starting at six am and finishing at mid-night Monday through Sunday. She studies hard under the supervision of her teachers who were always there to monitor her study habits, especially after school. Although she did not have much free time, she was able to deal with the pressure of student life and she received awards for her academic skills.

Upon entering the university, she was faced with a new schedule that allowed her to have many hours of free time, including the evenings and the weekends. However, they took away the two-hour break that she was used to having at lunch, which she usually used to sleep. She also did not adapt to changes in curriculum where she was introduced to group work and lot more speaking activities than she was used to (Brown, 1994).

Eventually Fen began to become disinterested in learning and she spent many of her free time hours by herself. She realized that she did not perform very well in the afternoon without her nap and she did not know how to manage her time because she never had to do so in the past. At midterms she scored low marks and the other members of her group complained that she did not give as much effort as they did during the meetings. Her teacher also noticed that she did not speak much in class and did not seem to be involved in any extracurricular activities.

Now, she is even more reserved and although she always comes to class, she seems to be falling behind and has lost her tenacity for learning that pushed her to be at the top of her class in high school.

(Source adapted from: http://www.liv.ac.uk/eddev/teaching_qualifications/CPS/index.htm)
2. Case Analysis

The case of Fen is just an example of many Chinese students at a Sino-British University. They are not foreign to the location since the university is based in China, but are still “foreign” to the western educational system that XJTLU takes. As teachers, we shall firstly understand the cultural and educational background of the students, and then figure out ways to help them adapt to the cultural difference and education norms in a western context (Brown & Palincsar, 1989).

**Fen excelled in study under strict schedule and constant supervision from teachers at high school, but fell behind when given much free time at the university.**

Compared to Western students, Chinese students are more dependent on their teachers. They expect their teachers to be like their parents and to help them whenever needed and solve problems for them. For example, in high school, they would have their teachers tell them exactly which pages to read in which book, and what to include in an essay and exactly how to structure the essay (Swee-Hoon, 2010). They may expect teachers to take an interest in not only their learning but also their personal well-being (University of Exeter, 2005). Guided and supervised closely by teachers, this group of students may perform well academically in high schools; but they would find it rather difficult to take complete responsibility for their own learning (Bruce & Pepitone, 1999).

Teachers have a central role in developing students’ own capacity for self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). As such, we shall help the students to form the habit of independent study once they get into our university. Students need to learn how to manage their own time by making plans and strictly adhere to them. Module teachers can guide them in formulating study plans by employing more formative assessments. For example, to reach the goal of writing a research proposal, instead of giving one big task, we may divide such into small tasks and set deadlines for each, from formulating a research question to determining data collection methods, from literature review to research findings write-ups. For the next writing coursework assessment, we may reduce the amount of instruction and allow the students more space in planning and reflection. Our role lies in facilitating them in gradually forming the habit of making plans, long term as towards their academic or life goals, short term as writing a simple essay. Academic advisor could give students advice on how to make personal plans and providing necessary supervision (Chuah, 2010).

**Fen was at the top of her high school class and able to deal with the pressure of student life, but scored low marks and became disinterested in learning soon after entering the university.**

Motivation is the ‘why’ of behavior (Stone, 2005). It is the force or desire that drives us to do what we do (Allan, 1996; Bruce & Pepitone, 1999), which can lead to brilliant achievements, which could also lead to self-destructive behaviors. Therefore, it is important for students to link the subject matter to their interests and maintain their motivation for learning. Nevertheless, people are motivated to do whatever to their best interests, or simply, what they need most. While module teachers are not able to give personal attention to each student in a big class, academic advisors could act on this point by suggesting or helping students identifying their real interests and personal needs and link these with their study, which is crucial in fostering lifelong learning as well.

Most high schools in China set Gaokao (the entrance examination to Chinese university) as the target of their education. Some students also reported that they are motivated to spare no effort in their study by the expectation that once they get into the university, they do not need to study hard any more. As a result, the students may score high in Gaokao; they might have lost their self-motivation and initiative for learning in the meantime. While studying in a western context requires more self-motivation and independent learning skills, it is even more important for students like Fen to find out what are their learning goals. What we could do as teachers is guiding the students to act in a specific, goal-directed way so as to meet our learning outcomes (He, 1996).

The students who chose a Sino-Western University may feel totally lost especially in the first semester whereas midterm exams come soon after they get into the university. Students do experience a great deal of difficulty with the transition which is to be made in a very short period of time (Chuah, 2010). If we do not realise this and help them in the sense, the students may lose their interests in study soon. What is even worse is students may run into depression and even commit suicide. In the past years we did have a few such cases which are indeed sad and undesirable. Nevertheless, module teachers, academic advisors and peer students, whoever noticing students under severe stress or with any psychological issues shall report to school immediately. Academic advisors should make sure that information about support services for both academic and pastoral issues is clearly and repeatedly communicated to students to ensure they safely pass the adjustment period. Secondly, as the Chinese students may have experienced a limited range of traditional assessment formats in high schools, module teachers may need to provide them with explicit guidance to deal with the new assessment formats they will encounter at XJTLU (University of Exeter, 2005).

Research in school settings also shows that frequent assessments without feedback have a ‘negative impact on moti-
vation for learning that militates against preparation for lifelong learning’ (Harlen & Crick, 2003; cited in Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Therefore, employing more formative assessments together with constructive feedback could be an effective form of guidance (Krashen, 1982).

Fen received awards for academic skills when in high school, but at the university, she was quiet and passive in class, neither participating much in the group work, nor getting involved in any extracurricular activities.

There are several possible reasons leading to Fen’s passiveness in and out of class. Firstly, she might be short of the academic skills needed at Western educational settings. Chinese students mainly listen to what has been taught and take notes in class, do homework assigned by teachers after class and take numerous exams along their school years (Chuah, 2010). Academic skills trained are mainly for exam purposes. Secondly, the Chinese exam oriented educational system may have encouraged competitive learners. Fen might view other students in class as her opponents that she resolves to outdo them in her study, which could lead to her reluctance in information sharing in class or group discussion. Competitive learners tend to rely on their own efforts and turn away from social and cooperative learning activities like group work (He, 1996). Thirdly, Fen might be an introvert learner shaped by the Chinese culture norms. Being quiet in class is to show respect to the teacher as most classes in Chinese schools are still teacher centered. Not speaking up could also be the result of avoiding “loosing face” of herself. Last but not least, she might be under great stress while facing difficulty in expressing herself in English (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Since more oral participation will certainly help to speed up students’ language learning process (Brown, 1994), students shall be well informed about the importance of oral participation in a language class and module teachers shall try and encourage these students to participate by creating an environment in which they feel supported and encouraged since the input is put to full use when the affective filter is ‘down’ and ‘acquisition’ occurs best when the learner is relaxed and motivated (Krashen, 1982). The use of ice-breakers in the first few classes is an effective way of getting the students to engage with each other and feel less conscious about expressing opinions in front of other students they are not familiar with. We need to be more aware of the non-verbal communication from our students, such as facial expression and eye contact, to picture whether the students could follow the class and give enough attention to those in need, which would be very helpful to students in their adjustment period at entering the university (Stone, 2005).

Each individual is an expert in one area and everyone has something to contribute in a team (Brown & Palincsar, 1989). Cooperative learning could provide students with the opportunities to learn from each other and share their learning experiences. Module teachers can facilitate such learning by employing more group projects. Providing the appraisal based on the group instead of individual performance would ensure them that they are not opponents any more.

Both students’ English ability and their academic skills needed at Western Higher Education Settings shall be trained. In most Sino-Foreign Universities, there are language courses targeting these skills. Take Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU) for example, upon entering the university, students will be taking English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in which students learn vocabulary and academic skills needed in different disciplines. Students are also provided with a range of tutorials, workshops and one-on-one consultation by Continuing Support services, focusing on study skills, learning techniques and how to best learn English in China. They also have Student English Association offering a comprehensive range of social, cultural and academic activities to students with opportunities to improve their English skills and become socially and culturally more adaptable to a western university. The students need to identify what their actual needs are and guide them to seek the extra help and to be more actively involved in the extracurricular activities.

Besides all above, students’ expectations of university study need to be set right from the beginning if they wish to successfully accomplish any degrees in western universities. It is also highly recommended that the Sino-Western universities offer summer school program(s) for students to experience the study life at these universities, as well as introduction session(s) in the orientation week for new students on the difference between the western and Chinese education systems to raise their awareness of these issues they may find challenging in the new environment (University of Exeter, 2005).

References


