

## Teaching and Learning Adaptation of International Students in Sweden

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## INTRODUCTION

The number of international students every year increases [4]. Moreover, the number of international students in western universities has drastically increased in the last four decades [2]. The change of country comes along with new challenges and difficulties for the newcomer students such as having to deal with different culture and people in the host country. In such situation, social and psychological factors that facilitate adaptation to the host country environment have been under focus of many researches during the last ten years (e.g., [4]; [2]; [5]; [14]; [12]; [18])

The top five sending countries in number of international students are U.S., U.K., France, Germany and Australia [3]. Therefore, most of the research about international students has been conducted in these countries. Furthermore, most of the researches about international students worldwide are focused on Asian international students. Vietnamese international students in France [2], East Asian students in U.S. [5] and Taiwanese students in U.S [18] are the examples.

Although there were 31,000 international students registered in Sweden in 2007/2008 [6], still not much research on this area has been done so far. Hence, this investigation attempts to tackle the lack of studies in this area by investigating learning and teaching adaptations for international students in the higher education system in Sweden.

Due to the lack of common conceptual framework, the field of study tends to be disparate. Since late 1990s, studies had been focused to point out the differences between international and local students, and the skills they need to be able to adapt in the foreign countries. Since 2000, the studies shift to the institutions and aim to call for new teaching strategies to meet the diversity in the classrooms. Finally, the trend to internationalization of curriculum is found. However, the research still mainly lies in promoting the one-way adaptation model, instead of transforming the problems into a positive and mutual learning process.

In this paper, we would like to present the opinions of international students both from “culture shock” and “academic shock” perspectives, and then link it with teachers’ experiences based on the survey and interviews. Sociocultural theory of learning is applied to understand this complex interaction and guides us towards a higher mutual learning goal. For teachers, international students should be seen as bearers of culture, rather than the bearers of problems. For students, cross-border choice provides the opportunity to learn about other cultures, and also the chance to appreciate one’s own.

## 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Janette [8], most international students experience three levels of shock: culture shock, language shock and academic shock. Culture shock refers to the differences in physical environment, customs, weather and personal relationship etc. [13] proposed the term cultural shock in late 1950s. He defined it as a disease suffered by those people who live in a new cultural environment. Cultural shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse [13]. Language shock is the language difficulties used in academic circumstance and in our case it is the Swedish in daily life during education in a foreign country. The challenge of academic writing was found not only in

international students but also among the native English speakers. After all this is everyone's challenge. The academic style of writing, technical terms and tones, and an excessive amount of reading material in English, all together create difficulties for learning and adaptation of international students in a new environment. It also creates difficulties in fully express their ideas in the class. Meanwhile, academic shock is seen as more challenging and persistent than the previous two, refers to the different approaches used in teaching and learning, relationship between teachers and students, critical thinking and different disclosure style, forms of assessment or even what counts as "knowledge" and so on. For example, a top-down writing style is more evident in the west whereas the bottom-up and what perceived as loose style is more likely to be found from the east. In many countries, teachers are seen as the authority of knowledge, this could in some extent affect the formality of student-teacher relation and participation in the class. In addition, the term of "knowledge" and the criteria to be seen as good students can also vary among cultures.

Sociocultural theory is introduced by the Russian psychologist, [17], and has a great influence in the field of education, particularly in the language learning of children. Besides, a prevailing shift from development perspective to a sociocultural model of learning is found in curricula design [1]. The major feature of this theory is that "social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition" [10], because our mental functioning is a mediated process. Humans are understood to utilize existing cultural artifacts and to create new ones that allow them to regulate their biological and behavioral activity and even an identity reformation in the new cultural environment [11]. This indicates an interactive learning process among teachers and students, and among peers through all kinds of group work and collaboration. Culturally diverse classroom provides the opportunities to promote critical thinking and intercultural communication skills for both international students and local students [15]. As Confucian also said, we get a good understand of us by looking at others. However, "a meta-cultural awareness", is not simply picking up bits and pieces of another culture, but knowing that within all cultures, there are changes, contradictions and ambiguities. Difference occurs not just between, but also within cultures [9]. Thus, simplicity and preconception of stereotype have to be avoided during teaching.

Another key aspect of sociocultural theory is the zone of proximal development [16], which presents the different development levels when students engaged in the social behavior (see Figure 1). These stages present a gradual learning process of students through teachers help and then develop the ability to do tasks without it. The stages are as following:

Stage 1 - assistance provided by more capable others (coaches, experts, teachers);

Stage 2 - assistance by self;

Stage 3 - internalization automatization (fossilization); and

Stage 4 - de-automatization: recursiveness through prior stages.

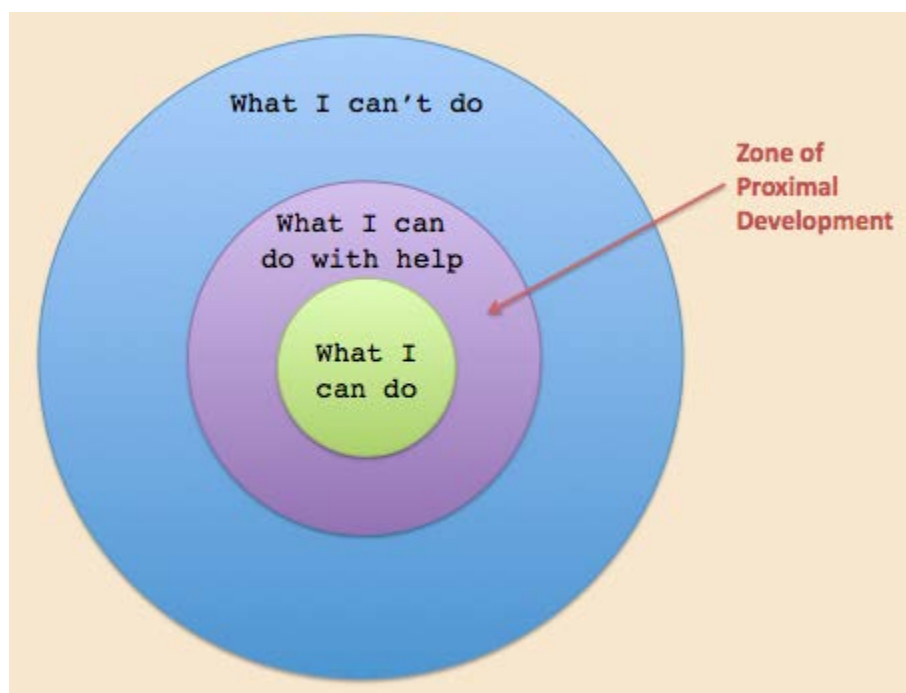


Fig. 1. "zone of proximal development" in sociocultural theory [19]

This could be a useful reference to help international students to improve their academic English and mitigate the language and academic barrier. The tools and cognitive strategies provided by the teachers are crucial to help students in reaching proximal development, whereas self-learning and internalization are important to realize the potential of learning. It implies an adaptation process both from teachers and international students.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

We used a mix-method with the intention to combine both teachers and student views on teaching and learning for international students. A survey with a semi-open questionnaire was used to capture international student perspectives (74 in total), and 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture teachers' perspectives. The interviews with the teachers were carried out face-to-face whilst the inquiries to the student were sent via Internet by means of an electronic survey. It should be noted that the results are not intended to come to generalization, but rather an indication of problems. In fact, cultural generalization among students could potentially hinder the teaching and learning process and thus pre-perception should be avoided.

## 3 CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

In Table 1, we analyse the difference between what teachers perceived as a challenge in knowledge transfer in class, and what international students perceived. We can see that language barrier, education system (expectations, norms, etc.), getting Swedish-International dynamics within group works, and the difference in formality of the student-teacher relations are important factors that could prevent effective knowledge transfer. Other factors mentioned by international students, but often neglected by teachers are cultural shocks such as not finding friends, not learning the Swedish language, and all that impacts their integration within the

Swedish norms and daily life. 10 percent of our respondents actually perceived this lack of integration as a barrier to their learning (e.g. homesickness).

The teacher respondents were aware of cultural, political, and religious sensitivities in class and in teaching. This issue came up once from a student from Mexico perceiving the teacher as having prejudice over cultural stereotypes. This could be interpreted in three ways: 1) that the awareness of teachers has been effective, 2) that this is not perceived as an issue by students, or 3) that students find this issue too sensitive to mention. This could however, prevent inter-cultural learning.

*Table 1.* Gaps between teacher and student perspectives on International student challenges

<b>Main Challenges in teaching to international students</b>	<b>Main challenges in learning for international students</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge transfer due to language barriers</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about the system and not asking questions risks International students misunderstand</li> <li>• To get them to work together</li> <li>• Political and religious sensitivities</li> <li>• Different cultures need different level of flexibility</li> <li>• The difference in formality of teacher-student relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language barrier in understanding</li> <li>• Try to understand the Swedish system</li> <li>• More active in class</li> <li>• Daily- and research- basis study</li> <li>• Be more organized, interested, serious</li> <li>• Focus more</li> <li>• The difference in formality of student-teacher relationship</li> <li>• Have Swedish friends (sports/school)</li> <li>• Study Swedish</li> </ul>

#### **4 TEACHING AND LEARNING ADAPTATION METHODS**

Due to the different origins, cultural and religious backgrounds, education levels, and other related factors it is difficult to generalize the adaptation methods to the host culture and system for international students. We however, observed some adaptation methods employed by the students in this study. For instance, the international student put some effort into learning more about the Swedish culture. A number of students also tried to learn the language to integrate better. Speaking, interacting and socializing with Swedish classmates, while considered difficult were perceived fruitful. Some of the students also tried to learn more about the education system and culture.

As a result of such challenges, teachers have adopted their teaching methods to accommodate their international students. Responses on these adaptation methods are listed in Table 2. Several of the adaptations can be related to language barriers. Teaching English classes in Sweden is a special context in which both teachers and students are communicating in a second language other than their native language. Both teacher and student responses clearly reflect this issue. Teachers have adopted

several methods to minimize the impact of language issues in knowledge transfer. For example, trying to speak in plain English, using more visual aid in lectures and workshops, and frequent check on whether students have grasped the topics are among such methods (see Table 2 for more details on the these methods). Several teachers also incorporate these methods realizing the more quiet nature of their international students. One teacher mentioned how this should not only be for international students, while another thought that the Swedish students will voice their misunderstanding so the teacher had to worry less.

In response to the cultural, politic, and religious differences and sensitivities teachers were modifying their examples and content to use sensitive ones. In addition, one of the teachers mentioned how using examples that all can relate can also accommodate better knowledge transfer. Three of the teachers also mentioned how in general they try to understand the cultural differences in the beginning of the class.

In response to lack of knowledge about the education system, four of the teachers mentioned that they try to be more explicit and detailed about the requirements and expectations. One of the teachers however, mentioned how this practice should not be merely for the international students. In an extreme response, one of the teachers thought that having separate classes for international students would help better knowledge transfer. This teacher had experienced that mixing classes can result in communication and content differences to the extent that would harm knowledge transfer. As teachers did not specifically think about cultural shocks students experience upon moving to Sweden, they did not mention any teaching adaptive methods. We will further discuss how theory contends that this should be reflected in teaching in the next section.

*Table 2.* Adaptation methods practiced by teachers towards International students

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### **Adaptations**

- Speaking plain English
  - Frequent check on understanding topics
  - Allow same language students to explain to each other
  - More time to explain
  - Use Swedes to explain to International
  - Ask possible native English speakers to repeat the points
  - Attending questions soon
  - Using visual aid
  - Visual aid and sound simulations
  - More writing on the board in International groups
  - Movies
  - More use of graphs, figures, and data
  - Modify and relate examples and content (Not to use religious or culturally sensitive examples)
  - Be more clear about the requirements and expectations
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- Understanding them before teaching
- Separate the classes for the International

## 5 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We set to investigate learning and teaching adaptations for international students in the higher education system in Sweden. In this research, it was found that international students perceived the Swedish students more proficient in the English language. They also found it difficult to interact with Swedish students and to integrate with the culture (e.g. in finding friends). There was a general opinion between South European students that they had a broader theoretical background than the average Swedish pupil. They perceived the Swedish educational system more practical-oriented; i.e. in contrast to other countries, where learning might be based solely from lectures, focus is on group works and self-study exercises. Overall, International students thought that Swedish students are more focused, organized, formal, serious and interested, making them more competitive, productive and effective during their studies and in their future career. Respondents perceived the Swedish students to have better knowledge of the education system. They also perceived the Swedish students to normally be more participative in class.

Also, almost all participants mentioned the informal student-teacher relationship. The authors argue that idealization of the teacher-student interaction could be dangerous in the sense that it would be hiding underlying teaching and learning problems. Kindness, politeness, help and proximity, do not necessarily imply a correct pedagogical attitude, although it may help. Furthermore, one should be careful as this protective behaviour could even turn into a lack of critical feedback to students.

At the same time, we found that teachers detect several of these challenges while oversee the cultural adaptation challenges such as not finding friends, not learning the Swedish language, and all the factors that impact their integration within the Swedish norms and daily life. Language barrier, knowledge of the education system (expectations, norms, etc.), developing Swedish-International dynamics among students, and difference in student-teacher relation norms were found to be important factors that could prevent effective knowledge transfer.

One point mentioned by teachers as a challenge in adapting to international students but not mentioned by the students, was cultural, political, and religious sensitivities. We interpreted this in three ways: 1) that the awareness of teachers has been effective, 2) that this is not perceived as an issue by students, or 3) that students find this issue too sensitive to mention. This could however, prevent inter-cultural learning within class. One suggestion is for teachers to actively use the cultural differences in teaching to further encourage and develop a forum for inter-cultural leanings.

From these findings from our empirical study, we found that the international students face both language and academic shock. The relevant adaptation methods followed both by teachers and students were positive in most cases. This further improves the one-way adaptation model. Actions such as: group work to create a social interactive play, as referred in the sociocultural theory, is crucial to promote critical thinking in class and is already a norm in Sweden. However, embedding different culture to reach a mutual learning goal is another question. Many measures taken are still perceived as seeing international students “problems”, rather than the “bearer of cultures”. This neglect could potentially hinder the learning from both sides, since many of the classes are separated between the locals and international students.

Efforts from both students and teachers to remove the language barriers are also found in our case study, as it is an important motivation for cross-border studies and they all strive to reach beyond the proximal development.

## 6 FURTHER RESEARCH

Due to the origin of the authors of this research, most of the interviewed students were from Spain, Iran and China, with 22, 13 and 8 members in each subgroup respectively. It is our belief that would be interesting to analyze the data in a country-dependent way. More interviews could be performed. By doing so, one could gain knowledge about the behavior of international students from particular subgroups, i.e. countries. In this manner, generalization is left aside and narrows down the problem, giving more specific solutions and guidelines to soften the adaptation of the newcomer.

Connecting to the sociocultural theory cultural background of students connected to their country of origin in fact impacts their level of academic and language shock. For example, in this study we observed that students from other Nordic countries (e.g. Finland and Iceland with 4 respondents in total) did not perceive substantial differences between their countries and Sweden, making their adaptation much easier. So, future studies to look deeper in to how background differences impact similar results of this study are suggested.

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### **Appendix A– Questionnaire for teachers**

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) Gender?
- 3) Where are you from?
  - In case you are from other country; how long have you been in Sweden?
  - In case you are from other country; are you fluent in Swedish?
  - How comfortable are you in English when teaching?
  - How good are you in English compared to your mother language when teaching (from 0-100%)?
- 4) How long have you been teaching?
- 5) Which courses/types of courses do you teach? Which level?
- 6) Have you ever taught in another country?
- 7) How many students are there in your class (average)?
  - How many international students are there in your class (average)?
  - Where do they come from?
- 8) In your perception; what is the difference between international and Swedish students?
- 9) What challenges do you have in dealing with international students?
  - Cultural challenges (religion...)?
  - Parts of the teaching (examples, examinations...)
  - Language barriers
- 10) Do you adapt your teaching to international students' challenges? If yes, how?
- 11) How do you treat students depending on their adaptation phase?

### **Appendix B– Questionnaire for students**

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dGZlckNYWTVFRXJCVV9OTlktcENyUnc6MQ>