



CULTURAL DIVERSITY: AN OVERVIEW

Mozhgan Azimi

Faculty of Education, University of Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The reason why I was interested in writing a research paper on the differences between Iranian culture and Malaysian culture, stemmed from one of my experiences in the university. As a foreign student, I witnessed some of these differences, but the one, which surprised me more than the others, was the learners' behaviours in class, when lecturer came into the class. In Iran, all the students stand up when the lecturer comes into the class, but, in Malaysia, nobody stands up. One day, some of Iranian students and I sat in front row in the class. When the lecturer entered the class, all of us stand up at the same time, as we do in Iran. But, she was scared and stepped back. Her strange reaction encouraged me to do a research.

The present study reflects some different cultural patterns. Since, there are many Iranian students in Malaysia, understanding these differences seem essential. The sample for this research was selected availability. Some Malaysian students were selected randomly, while they were wandering in the campus. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Then, it was grouped in a few categories and was compared with Iranian categories. The finding was shown as a report. The results indicated that there is not a big difference between two cultures.

© 2013 AESS Publications. All Rights Reserved.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural diversity, Cultural patterns.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are different definitions of culture, but the most important ones are as follows:

Culture is a combination of human knowledge, beliefs and behaviors. There are some shared values, goals and attitudes which are formed a cultural group (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952).

Creswell (2005) points out culture includes everything which is related to human's behavior and belief. He expresses that culture has some important ingredients such as language, economic and political patterns, interactions, style of life and the manner of communication.

But, is culture too important to be studied among different nations? If so, why?

Nowadays, the increasing of population is so fast, thus, there is not enough place for all eligible persons go to university in their country. Consequently, some of them make a decision to study abroad.

The international university in general and the University of Malaysia in particular admit many foreigner students every year. The international students come from different countries; therefore, they have different academic experiences, different educational background and above all very different cultural patterns. In other word, sometimes, they encounter a very big cultural gap.

2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Culture is very important because it covers many different parts of human life. It is directly related to the human experiences regardless of gender, age and race. It forms people's everyday life, their views, lifestyles, basic assumptions, their perceptions and above all, the culture shapes the individuals' relationship (Vossughi, 2000). People prefer group themselves according to the cultural similarities. After considering similarities, the individuals form some cultural groups. Cultural groups have the same values, beliefs and behavioral patterns. They have many things in common. Learning another culture involves understanding the most details of values and assumptions of it. But, the most important thing involves accepting these values and assumptions. Perhaps the easiest way to learn and understand a culture is to go into the culture very deeply.

On the other hand, cultural diversity is very significant since people with different cultures have an unpleasant feeling to each other because of misunderstanding. Different culturally groups experience many problems while communicating. But, what does exactly cultural diversity mean?

(Vossughi, 2000)classified cultural diversity as follows; he points out;

"Cultural diversity includes (but is not restricted to): language, race, ethnic background, country or region of origin, dress, values, religion and associated practices, social and community responsibilities, sexuality, disability, notions of family, family responsibilities, political views"(p.54).

Since University of Malaya is an international university, many foreign students are accepted with different background culture. They have to be in contact to each other, they must do some assignments, give presentation, sending text message and so on. These differences cause many problems. Therefore, recognizing the reasons of these problems seems important.

The major goal of this study is to aid the international students (Iranian students) to overcome the problems which are created because of different cultural background. But, for doing this important job, some issues must be considered. Since, the nature of the study is “*explanatory research design*” (Creswell, 2005), because there is no manipulation of variables, just a few points were studied. Therefore, the main focus of this study was on the seven points.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Subjects and Procedures

Since the major goal of this study was to aid Iranian students to overcome the problems which are created because of different cultural background, the first step was to find out the most important problems. Therefore, the researcher did some interviews. The subjects were selected

availability. Some Malaysian students were selected randomly, while they were wandering in the campus. Therefore, the results will not be generalized to all students in UM or Malaysia.

Data collection was done through interviews. The interviews were open-ended. Each interview includes seven points. The cases were interviewed separately; the voice recorder was used. They were informed their answers were recorded. All the interviews were recorded and were subsequently transcribed.

The interviews were not formal, and the researcher considered extra time required; if the cases wanted to mention something, the time limitation did not disturb them. The interviews were semi-structured because, in qualitative design, the interviews should be informal, free and without a special structure. It must be like a friendly chat (Mirzaee and Fatemipour, 2000). Interviews were done face to face.

Kvale (1983) defines the qualitative research interview as “an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 174). To find out the diversity culture in the certain points, depth-data is needed. Since, in face-to-face interview, there is no delay between questions and answers, interviewees answer spontaneously, it is supposed that their answers exactly reflect their opinions (Mirzaee and Fatemipour, 2000). Furthermore, interviewers can observe facial expressions. The researcher developed the survey instrument (interview) for this study.

An inductive thematic analysis was used to find out the subjects’ underlying concepts and themes frequently mentioned (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These general themes and underlying concepts were put in some categories. Then, these categories were organized in a coherent and meaningful manner.

Responses to the interviews were classified, general concepts and key ideas were put in different categories. The key ideas in each category were coded. The shared problems among the cases were identified. Then, the researcher’s interpretation was added. These issues were put in the appropriate category if they were new.

The next step was a review all the categories in order to find commonalities and differences. The similar categories overlapped each other and became one category.

Then a list of categories was prepared. To arrange the list, prioritizing was done. Then, the result was demonstrated in a report form. Table 1 outlines some general themes of the learners’ opinions regarding to diversity culture as articulated during the interview sessions.

Table-1. students’ statements

Greetings
Patience
Drinking in the class
Keep their seats when the lecturer enters
Women's riding motorcycles
Using some informal words in formal situations
The style of wearing clothes

They were asked their opinions about the following points:

1. Greeting is very important in some cultures like Iranian cultures. When friends meet each other in Iran, they greet between 2-5 minutes. When Iranian students see their foreign friends, they want to act out in the same way they do in Iran. But, the Malay students do things differently. These different behaviours cause Iranian students to feel unpleasant. They think they are not accepted, they have bad characteristics or they behave badly. Generally, it creates serious problems. But, the subjects of this study asserted the other thing. They told that generally Malaysian people like to meet strange people and they are ready to start a conversation with a complete stranger. But, for greeting they have different ways. A Muslim offers his right hand; however, some ladies prefer not to shake hands. Hindus bring both palms together and Chinese use the usual hand shake. And nodding the heads and giving smiles are the usual way to greet in Malaysia.
2. Patience creates the other problem, generally, Iranian have little patience. They get angry easily and they object to undesired situations very fast. They do their jobs as quickly as possible as though they are in a hurry all the time. But, Malay people do things in their own way. They are very relaxed and do their jobs very carefully and in turn. First, they do a job, finish it and then start the next one. And if somebody is in hurry, he waits silently. Generally, there is no objection.
3. The other shocking point is that students can drink or even eat in the class while lecturers teaching. And more surprisingly, the lecturers drink something if they want during class. We never drink or eat during a class. But, Malay students told the researcher this is very usual in their country. If we (Iranian) do this action in the class, it is considered very impolitely and the teachers or lecturers can object and fire the students from the class.
4. The next issue is related to the students' positions in the class while entering a teacher or lecturer into the class. If students don't stand up while entering a teacher in Iran, they will be objected and their actions considered impolitely. But, Malay subjects seemed very surprised when the researcher asked them this point. They believe that there is no reason to do this job. And they added they did it when they were students at schools not universities.
5. The next point is related to the women and their rights. They can ride a motorcycle. They believe that riding motorcycles by women is very usual and there is no wrong thing regarding this matter. But, women are not allowed to ride a motorcycle in Iran. They don't even have any license for riding motorcycles in Iran.
6. It is a surprise that in a very formal situation, some informal words are used. A very informal word is used very frequently is HA. If Malay people want to answer a phone or show that they don't understand the addressee, they say "HA". This word or sound is considered very informal in Iran and sometimes it seems very impolite if it is used in formal situations like a class.
7. Another very important part of Malaysian culture is the style of the wearing clothes. In very formal places, like university or offices, the Malay people wear very informal clothes. They even wear slippers. When they were asked the reasons, they just laughed and told they had never thought it before, but it seemed very usual to them.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that there are some problems among Iranian and Malay students in UM based on cultural diversity. Although a single research is not able to provide valid proof, it is hoped this study can help to students from different culture understand each other better.

The present paper just showed the most obvious cultural diversity based on the researcher's experiences as a foreign students and it doesn't want to evaluate none of the mentioned cultures. The researcher doesn't claim that her findings can be applied in all similar situations. Additional research is obviously needed.

REFERENCES

- Creswell, J.W., 2005. Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research. 2nd Edn: Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Kroeber, A.L. and C. Kluckhohn, 1952. Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum.
- Kvale, S., 1983. The qualitative research interview: A phenomenological and a hermeneutical mode of understanding. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 14: 171-196.
- Miles, M.B. and A.M. Huberman, 1994. Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mirzaee, K. and H.R. Fatemipour, 2000. Second language research methods. Arasbaran Publishers.
- Vossughi, H., 2000. An encyclopedic dictionary of teaching english as a foreign language. Rahnama.

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the authors, International Journal of Asian Social Science shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.