

Student article

Language, Culture, and Learning: One Chinese Student's Experience in the UK

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I am Chinese and I am taking my pre-Master's course in Nottingham Trent International College. Then, I will take my Master's course in Management and Investment Strategy at Nottingham Trent University in the UK. As an international student, there are many obstacles that overseas student may face when they are studying in a foreign country without their family members or close friends, although they may make friends in that country. As a result, usually, overseas students can find that it is difficult to live on their own when they feel lonely because of homesickness. Personally, I find the greatest difficulties are the language barrier, cultural differences and different learning styles between the UK and home.

Language is one of the main issues for international students because they must use English to live and study. It may take a long time to adapt to using the language correctly, even like a native speaker. The language barrier is a main problem for me to study abroad and in fact I had never been to a foreign country before. Therefore, before I came to the UK, I worried that I might not understand other people, or I would express myself in a way that would put me in an embarrassing situation or I might say something rude to others. Yet, now I am living in the UK, my worry seems to have been wrong in that I experience British citizens to be very kind to foreigners and they will explain time after time until you fully understand what they are talking about.

To overcome linguistic barriers, it takes time, effort and practice by yourself and communicating with others every day. There was a great improvement when I was studying on a Preparatory English course because I had to use English, like speaking English with classmates and tutors, reading the articles that tutors gave, listening to videos and doing writing practice. All of these helped me to upgrade my English. In addition, I used sources from the internet to improve my language by reading the tips for learning English, listening to BBC radio and other methods. I was continuously working on it for three or four hours a day in a six-month period. Ultimately, I achieved all the requirements that I needed. At that moment I realised that there is no gain without pain. The linguistic barrier was definitely the hardest one to overcome, and I'm still working hard to improve my language.

Generally, language might be easier to adapt to than culture, but I did not feel anxious about culture shock because I enjoy learning about different cultures around the world and I want to gain more knowledge about different countries' cultures to broaden my horizons. However, I did find myself shocked by the alcohol consumption of the UK people. I have written a report for a course which is about alcohol-related public issues in the UK. According to this, I found there are three main issues that are worrying the UK government: public health including increasing mortality, crimes, and accidents. I once saw a person drunk and unconscious on the street. Nobody wanted to help him. If continued heavy drinking like this leads to liver cancer or liver failure it can be seen as a kind of suicide. I cannot really understand this

custom because of this experience, and also because I have an alcohol allergy, so I cannot enjoy drinking alcohol.

Furthermore, the eating style surprised me in the first couple of months when I lived in the UK because in China people always have hot food like noodles or rice for lunch and have a long lunch time, but it is totally different in the UK. The lunch break is short and the time is only enough for having a sandwich. I found this difficult to accept at first. As time goes by, although I do not dislike doing this, I cannot always eat a sandwich as a lunch because it is not enough for me to feel full. Consequently, sometimes, I cannot enjoy my lunch and then I have to go back to the college to have lessons. This means that sometimes I cannot focus on what is going on in the class. However, obviously, this is a habit of the UK, so I really should adapt to it.

Not only is food culture different between China and the United Kingdom, but the study style is also totally different. In particular, the exam system in China is rigid, which means all the exam answers are settled. Thus, you just remember what the teachers said about the subject and write the answers down on the test paper. This means that students might not develop their capability of analysis and explanation. On the other hand, it can help students gain knowledge quicker and keep it in their mind. In contrast, the answers of the exams answers in the UK can be creative, which mean there could be often no single right and wrong answers in the exams, but several different acceptable answers. This education may make students open their mind and train their creativity. Having experienced Chinese style education and now under British style education, I think combining these two styles to teach students of the next generation would be a perfect approach.

Another difference in learning style is that when writing an essay, a report or a proposal in a UK university, normally, a great number of references should be read and listed. A university student in China may only produce one report – a thesis – in his/her four year school life, whereas a UK university student does much more writing. In this writing, citations may be a problem for Chinese students because there is no citation or quotation in their school thesis. In addition, most Chinese students are not good at finding sources. English is not our mother tongue, after all, and sometimes we cannot really understand the meaning of the source's title, and there are numerous specific academic and professional words that even people whose first language is English might not understand, let alone international students. Also plagiarism, such as copying and pasting, is a serious matter in the UK. For example, my sister's friend copied and pasted a paragraph of my sister's report and was found out by the professor. The professor with other two administrators had a meeting with them, told them this is a serious problem in the university and blamed them severely. This nearly made them drop out of the university.

In conclusion, there are many problems that overseas students have to face. They have to solve their own physical and emotional problems. The major problems of language barrier, cultural differences and different studying styles between China and the UK are not easy to go through. However, through learning to deal with these problems, students can eventually become more capable and independent.

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