Transnational Education: Our Expectations and Our Challenges. Is Anyone Listening? From teachers’ and students’ perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In the 70’s and early 80’s, many Malaysian students went to the West to further their tertiary education. They completed their undergraduate program from year one in the respective foreign countries. In the late 80’s, there was a shift in trend. More students conducted their initial years in Malaysia before finishing off their final years in the West. Multiple twinning programs that utilize foreign curriculum but implemented in Malaysian environment are offered at various private educational institutions. In the light of this phenomenon, transnational education or cross-border education is not novel within the Malaysian educational landscape.

This paper is a reflection of the author who had experienced trans-national education as a student and currently experiencing it as a teacher. We ponder upon the nature of experiences that students involved in trans-education encounter that potentially modify their learning behaviors. As for the students, we conclude that they generally experience three types of shocks that are cultural shock, learning shock, and assessment shock. Observations made on the challenges faced by the students to adapt to the demands of the curriculum, novel strategies of teaching and learning as well as requirements of assessments are reported. Finally, we proposed some steps that could be taken to reduce the impact of multiple shocks and enhance learning in trans-national program.

KEY WORDS

Transnational education, Foreign curriculum, ESL/EFL learners, Cultural shock, Learning shock, and Assessment shock
Introduction

Transnational education (TE) can assume various forms such as accredited programs, twining programs, credit transfer program, and foreign branch campus (Lee, 2003). UNESCO defines TE as, "All types of higher education study programs, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based." (UNESCO and Council of Europe, 2000).

In Malaysia, following the broad term as defined above, transnational education has quite a lengthy history. From the 1950's up to 1970's, the curriculum and assessment in Malaysian schools were based on the Cambridge university system. Selected groups of students, especially those from English schools went directly to the West, mainly to the UK, to further their tertiary education. These students completed their undergraduate program from year one in the respective foreign countries.

However, in the late 80's, there was a shift in trend. More students conducted their pre-university and initial years in Malaysia before finishing off their final years in the West. Multiple twinning programs that utilize foreign curriculum but implemented in Malaysian environment are offered at some public and various other private educational institutions. The increasing cost in higher education in the West had stimulated the growth of this industry. Until today, the number of institutions offering them is quite large and still growing. The practice continues as the demand becomes even more popular among local students and those from neighboring countries.

In addition to the twinning program trend, Malaysian government has also been inviting foreign institutions to set up branch campuses, which started in July 1998 with the setting up of Monash University Malaysia. It is then followed by others, Curtin University of Technology Sarawak, RMIT and University of Nottingham Malaysia (Lee, 2003; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2004).

The main author did her first two years of undergraduate with ITM/MUCIA program in Malaysia. In this program, students took the first two years of undergraduate in pre-engineering, pre-business, and computer science courses in Malaysia (CIEDA, 2001). Classes were conducted in English by American and local academicians who graduated from the USA. The author then continued her study in the USA and graduated from University of Arizona, Tucson. As a student, she had a first hand’s experience undergoing the twinning type of TE. She is currently teaching Mathematics at Canadian International Matriculation Program (CIMP).

However, the co-author has a slight difference in his experience with TE. After completing secondary school in Malaysia, he went directly to the USA to further his tertiary education. He received his first degree from Rochester Institute of Technology and a master degree from University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is currently teaching a Biomedical course in a twinning program with the University of Newcastle, Australia. As academicians teaching students who are undergoing TE, we reflect upon the experiences that our students generally encounter as they study in the TE environment.
Rationale

Questions that we always ponder upon are how well do our students adept to the teaching and learning process that is demanded by the foreign curriculum? Are the challenges that the students face appropriately diagnosed? What are the supports available to the students to overcome their challenges in pedagogical as well as assessment methods? We found that there is limited information on this issue especially in the context of Malaysian learners. Available literature mainly emphasizes upon the impact of foreign curriculum at institutional and governmental level whether in the aspect of quality assurance (Coleman, 2003), economics (McBurnie, 2002), and social (Eltechelebi, 1999). Although, Ziguras (2001) did focus upon some possible cultural differences that may challenge the dynamics of learning, but the author does not specifically focus upon challenges in implementing the curriculum to the learners (Ziguras, 2001). Thus, in order to fill the information gap we attempt to characterize the challenges face by our learners.

Methodology

This paper is based upon personal reflection of both authors who encounter students’ struggling to adapt to the novel culture of TE on a daily basis. It is a further extension of an earlier paper that has previously been presented1. Observations are conducted on two unrelated and discrete group of students sitting for course MDM4U (Mathematics of Data Management) at the CIMP, Sunway University College and HUBS1202 (Human Genomics and Biomolecular Analysis) at Taylor’s College Subang Jaya, a twinning program with University of Newcastle, Australia. The only common denominator among the two groups of students is that they are mainly Malaysians (over 95%) and they study foreign curriculum (Mohamad, 2005). Observations have been conducted since year 2004. Informal interview sessions and qualitative responses that students submitted are also incorporated into the said observations.

Observations and discussions

Multiple shocks

The word ‘shock’ is defined as something that greatly affects the mind or emotions to a sudden, an unexpected and usually unpleasant event or experience (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). Shock is the symptom that one face when one moves from a familiar to an unfamiliar surrounding and thus usually an unwelcome life experience. In the learners’ perspective, shocks are never conducive to learning nor do they stimulate learning.

Our observations lead us to deduce that when students begin their study in TE environment, there are at least three major shocks that they will encounter. The three shocks are: culture shock (CS), learning shock (LS), and assessment shock (AS). Perhaps the level of ‘shock’ may be different from one student to another, yet we

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1 Implementing an Australian Curriculum of a Biomedical Science course in Malaysian environment: A teacher’s reflection. Presented at INCUE 2005, Shah Alam, Malaysia
believe that it is an unavoidable experience that they encounter. In the following sections, we further define and elaborate the reasons that direct us to make such conclusions.

**Culture Shock**

There is abundant literature written on students’ experience of culture shock (CS). They mainly focus upon the nature of symptoms and stages of the shock and outline recommendations on how to ease and eventually eliminate the shock. Among the many definitions available, we prefer to quote Dr. Oberg's, an anthropologist, who defines CS as “… precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse”. In the case of our students who are immersed in TE, we suggest that they are facing “culture shock” because they are encountering unfamiliar living and learning environment that pose different or even conflicting expectations and demands on them. TE approaches at times are in conflict with the local educational setting.

Students who enter TE generally starts with excitement but later experience shocks that may lead to stress and depression. We notice that their excitement is contributed by the fulfillment of TE expectation that they can easily observed and we term it as “outer culture”. The “outer culture” is the college experience that provides freedom unlike their schools environment. In college, no strict uniform dress code exists and being Asians who have been confined to this rule during school years, its absence implies freedom. The sense of ‘freedom’ allows them to adapt or create a novel look and life style. Being teenagers or young adults, this opportunity is very exciting and provides interesting input to their life. They experiment with novel approaches whether at group or personal level.

A part of the outer culture is that they experience relaxed pace of structured studying and less demand on attending classes as experienced during their high school. Instead of having to take eight to ten subjects simultaneously (as they experienced in high schools), they are taking only three or four subjects. Thus, they have more leisure time. With about half of the structured class load is taken off their daily lives, they encounter challenges towards optimizing their learning.

Another aspect of outer culture enables TE students to interact closely with expatriate teachers in their classrooms. After all, if the students are enrolled in a foreign-based program, they expect to be taught by foreign teachers. Our informal survey indicates that students generally perceive that the expatriate teachers are of better quality than the local teachers (Mohamad, 2005). A student states, “Everything is different. Some of them are exciting especially when I got an English teacher who is a native English speaker.” Since the existence of expatriate teachers fulfills the students’ expectations, they assumed that TE learning environment is full of fun and excitement.

In contrast to the observable “outer culture”, students are shocked when they come to discover the more subtle “inner culture” of TE learning. These comprise of fulfilling curriculum expectations and conducting in class and outside class works. Their excitements tend to be short changed with fear of the totally different learning expectations that they were familiar with. They are anxious and worried that they may not be able to attain them. Students generally complained of the difficulties in
achieving the foreign curriculum’s expectations. The main author is able to personally relate to the students’ experiences, as she herself was experiencing what they are going through when she entered the tertiary TE program as a student 16 years ago.

Primarily, TE courses demand that students actively participate in class. Participation is not only encouraged but required and is assessed as part of students’ performances. TE teachers expect students to ask questions, propose argument, defend reasoning and conduct intellectual discussions in class. Most of the times, students do not understand why these are important aspect of their learning but when they realize the need to participate, the lack of appropriate skills to contribute limit their active involvement in class. They would rather be invisible during the classroom discussion as indicated by a student, “I noticed that we have smaller class size than in school, virtually un- escapable from being noticed by anyone in classroom especially by the teachers. Therefore, actual participation is unavoidable. At school, there was one teacher to about 40 students. I was a quiet student, so I was practically invisible. That could be a good thing sometimes.”

In general, students were never taught to speak up their mind, and most felt that it is considered rude to argue other’s points of view even more so the instructors. Their previous learning culture has somewhat made students inherently believe that everything printed is correct, and everything said by a teacher is an unarguable truth. They are used to the idea that a quiet class is excellent in supporting learning because everyone is “really learning”. Students view learning as an individual, independent and quiet endeavor to absorb information. They have performed this role all their lives, the belief that teachers are supposed to do the talking, and not the students has been ingrained in them as the philosophy of “teaching and learning”. When TE curriculum encourages student-centered learning where learners are expected to actively participate in class discussions, it poses a shocking cultural experience. It invalidates the students’ previous belief and learning experience.

Second, TE courses demand learners to perform projects within group work setting. For the most part, many students felt frustrated that they have to conduct group work. Since Malaysian students are generally very competitive and their previous learning experiences have been grade motivated, group work performance hinders and is in contradiction to their achievement potential. As such, most of them are very much individualistic in approaching learning. From their previous experiences, teamwork in schools was limited to extra-curriculum activities and sports but never academic endeavour. On contrary, the trait is looked down upon as negative in the academic setting and it is highly discouraged. As a result, many students who are academic high achievers are void of essential skills to work within a group. Their lack of ability to communicate and argue their ideas as well as to negotiate tasks sent them into the state of culture shock.

Third, TE courses integrate performing research as part of course requirement. It is assumed that students are capable of performing sound research. In reality, many of our students lack basic understanding of research, let alone the skills required to conduct it. Generally, they used to be “spoon fed” or instructed closely on gathering information, thus, it was never a necessity to conduct research. Therefore, students are not familiar with scientific research design and process that includes finding a suitable research topic, forming a reasonable hypothesis and testing the hypothesis.
Having to conduct sound research, coming up with sensible arguments and conclusion, and making proper citation from references are very alien tasks that students are expected to be able to do. Thus, the deceiving “outer culture” of TE that brought excitement to the students last as soon as they realize the true picture of TE through its “inner culture” – all these expectations! All in all, the unfamiliar educational environments that the students are placed in (classrooms that require them to speak their minds, activities that mandate group work and assumption that students can conduct research) landed them to CS.

**Learning Shock**

Griffiths, et al., (2004) discussed the issue of learning shock (LS) quite extensively in their paper. The authors define LS as “an anxiety, frustration and confusing experiences faced by students when they are exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods”. According to Maynard (2005), LS happens when students realize that the way they have been used to learning and studying is inappropriate to the way courses are taught. In the context of TE learning, we suggest that LS is understood as the unpleasant experience that students encounter caused by unfamiliarity to novel learning skills that they need to acquire while studying within TE environment.

We observe that LS occurs due to the lack of learning skills expected from our TE learners. Some of the learning skills that they have developed prior to TE are inappropriate, insignificant, and under develop. In the paragraphs below, we attempt to highlight the discrepancies that present.

Primarily, students lack the ability to think critically and creatively. The development of thinking skills has not been placed as higher priority within the students’ previous schooling experience. Meta-cognitive or thinking about thinking was never realized and explored let alone being taught and practiced as a generic course or incorporated and integrated within academic disciplines. Performing divergent thinking in order to come up with various solutions to a single problem was never encouraged. For the most part students may have performed superficial convergent thinking where one right answer to one problem is expected and solicited by teachers. The previous pedagogical and assessment approach that does not require the utility of these skills in learners further contribute to their absence in our students.

Second, prior to TE, students are mainly expected to master the content of educational materials but never the process of education. The logical thought process that is involved in learning has never been emphasized. As a result, they are handicapped when asked to describe the strategies and steps that they employ to solve certain problems. For them the correct answer is all that matter and explaining logically their chosen approach is never important. Furthermore, in their previous learning, students are not required to explicitly communicate their understanding in a direct mode whether orally or by written work. They are also not required to present original ideas in a logical way so as to communicate deep understanding. In schools, the heavy burden of handling large classrooms unable teachers to interact individually with the students to assess their actual understanding. Thus the students’ ability to communicate understanding of learned materials is under developed. In TE, these students are at disadvantage since they are expected to communicate their understanding in various modes and elaborated forms.
Third, many students lack good communication skills. Since the students’ previous learning years never stressed on them having to conduct active learning, thus, this skill is underdevelop. Prior, learners are viewed as empty container to be filled with knowledge by the teacher. Information and knowledge transfer and delivery have been limited in a single direction from teachers to students. These practices lead to students lacking the skills to challenge ideas and construct arguments. They are untrained in various aspects of oral communications including skills to conduct group discussions. Furthermore, they also lack the abilities to conduct oral presentation in order to share their learning with their peers.

Fourth, many of our students lack the capabilities to manage their own learning. Prior to TE, their learning have been structured carefully and dictated in details by their superior. They are not used to select course options since flexibility is not a hallmark of Malaysian education system. Furthermore, within a course, many students are not equipped with the skills of setting independent learning goals, carefully identifying and designing their own learning strategies to achieve the goals, and later assess the success in fulfilling them.

Another aspect of managing learning that is lacking in our learners is managing time. In Malaysian educational scenario, students would go to school and learn structured subjects, be sent for additional tutorials, and participate in pre-determine extra-curricular activities. Every single hour of the learners’ time is arranged by either school or parents and they lack independent and flexible options. In TE, they have to design their own learning and be their own learning manager. Options in learning are available and flexibility in time is a norm. Since they lack prior experience and organizing skills, many of our students cannot cope with the responsibility to manage their own learning.

Finally, research skills are foreign to many of our students. Since their research skills are under developed, it is a challenge for them to conduct proper research. The logical approach to choosing research topics, coming up with hypothesis, research design, testing hypothesis, collecting data and writing up findings are all novel to them. Since the challenges are sometimes tremendous, many resort to plagiarism. They realized that they are handicapped in term of research capabilities but at the same time aspire to obtain good grade. The one semester allocated for students to master disciplinary content as well as multiple research skills is overly demanding and place students into a strongly disadvantaged position.

Although some aspects of LS (unfamiliarity with expected learning styles) are quite similar to CS (unfamiliarity with learning environment), LS mainly deals with the ability of the students rather than the changing surrounding. In conclusion, students studying in TE experience LS due to their lack of learning skills expected by the foreign curriculum.

**Assessment Shock**

We decided to characterize assessment shock (AS) differently than surrounding influence that contributes to CS or learning skill deficiency that lead to LS. This is due to our observation that shows that, AS is an important enough factor that contributes to another major shock on TE learners. Since no relevant literature is
available on AS, we attempt to define it as a state of confusion experienced by learners who are not familiar with assessment types that have been designed for purposes not limited to grading, their administering methodology and outcomes to be obtained from them (Mohamad, 2005).

In general, our students are familiar with summative types of assessment (SA) or assessment of learning and have developed good test taking strategies to approach them. They however, are not familiar with and have not experienced formative assessments (FA) or assessment for learning. The only assessment that they are familiar with is the SA, which is used for grading and ranking purposes. Assessment was not used as a tool to help learning but rather a yardstick to judge learning. As they are required in TE to utilize classroom assessment as a learning tool (Knight, 2002), many students have trouble in reflecting and using it to improve their learning. Their major limitation lies in the deficiency of understanding it conceptually as well as lacking the skills required to self-learn from these assessments.

Second, their familiarity with a single assessment method prevents them from taking risks in performing other types of methods. Their unfamiliarity with diverse methods creates fear and builds up high anxiety. In their previous schooling experience, our students were used to perform drilling exercises to prepare them for the national standardized examination. A good portion of the classroom teaching and learning time is spent on mastering the strategy to A's the examinations. Techniques are imparted and mock tests following the exact format of the national examination are frequently administered. As soon as TE courses introduced multiple assessment methods, students experience quite a significant shock.

Third, in their schooling experience, assessment has always been test oriented rather than task oriented. Thus, schools or tuition centers are expected to drill the students so that they can orient themselves to a specific test format. These students develop excellent skill in taking paper-pencil and standardized tests. In TE courses, assessment comprises of demonstrating depth of understanding by performing tasks with various levels of difficulties. The nature of the assessment as well as the multiple skills that students are assessed on creates a daunting task on them. Moving from test-oriented to performing tasks, such as oral presentation, lab report, and projects, becomes a frightening experience that land students facing AS.

Fourth, their previous learning emphasized mastery of content and that is what they are tested for on the SA. However, in TE, students are no longer tested only on their abilities to recall information. In TE learning, mastering of contents as well as process are emphasized. As such, in order to perform excellently in a course, they have to demonstrate their ability to fully communicate their knowledge and understanding. Assessment scheme also includes students’ ability to apply their knowledge in solving novel problems. In most instances, students are not able to drill on the exercises and hope for similar type of questions to re-appear during the SA.

Fifth, during school years it was only the higher authority, usually teachers, who assessed the students. In TE, they have to assume responsibility on assessing their own learning (self-assessment) as well as assessing others (peer-assessment). For example, in MDM4U course, some percentage of their final grade is based on the marks that their peers assigned to them. Every semester, there have always been a few
students who are uncomfortable with the marks that they received from their peers. One claimed, "Teacher, you should be the one who assign the marks because the peers are bias. You mark more fairly." When we diagnose the problem further, the main issue was the teacher-centered assessment view that prevails among students led them to believe that they cannot make fair and professional judgments on themselves neither onto others. Developing the skills to self assess as well as assessing others is another expectation that lead students to experience AS.

Finally, administering SA alone allows students to perform last minute studying. For some students, the strategy has worked out well for them during their schooling days and they intend to continue practising it in TE learning. They are quite shock when they discover that continuous process of assessments is installed. In many TE courses, the grade would depend on the cumulative efforts from the beginning of a course, instead of just based on a one-shot examination at the end on the term.

In conclusion, our students experience assessment shocks (AS) due to their unfamiliarity with the diverse assessment methods and the multiple purposes they may have been administered. In addition, students are expected to continuously utilize assessments to improve their learning and focus on the process as well as the contents. Familiarizing themselves with variety of tasks rather than just paper-pencil tests, and being able to make sound evaluation on themselves and on others are other factors that are contributing to AS.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we hope that we have clearly outlined the struggle that we observe our students encounter daily within the TE teaching and learning landscape. It is a battle to be won by not only students but TE teachers as well. The diagnosis performed lead us to deduce the discrepancies into three major shock categories that are namely culture, learning and assessment. We also notice that shocks can never generate positive learning outcomes.

As educators, we hope that our ability to identify these issues will assist us in preparing and delivering our lessons better to help our students adapt the culture of learning in TE. The realization of the challenges faced by our student made us more aware of their needs to be assisted to enable them to make appropriate TE learning transition quickly and painlessly. Instead of continuing the approach that has previously been one size fits all for all learners, customary assistance maybe required on personalized basis since not all students experience all the shocks at the same time to the same degree. We need to cater and merge the students’ needs with the TE expectations.

In regards to institutional assistance, we feel that local and corresponding international institutions should realize that within TE, there exist many domains that need to be supported. Mastering subject content is only a small fraction of the TE challenges especially for new students as well as new teachers. Well designed teacher re-orientation program, adequate supporting staff training program as well as comprehensive student orientation and training module may go a long way to provide major assistance in reducing the impact of multiple shocks that we have raised.
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