

Adaptation Process and Challenges in Intercultural Communication among Chinese University Students in German: Based on Culture Shock Theory

Jiayi Li*

School of Europe, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

*Corresponding author: xuruqian@ldy.edu.rs

Abstract. As for international students, although the series of challenges they face before going abroad, such as applications and examinations, are over for the time being. While some students may find it difficult to immediately adjust to a foreign culture, this does not imply that studying abroad is without personal problems. This paper uses the "U" curve model and the ABC model to study each of the four basic stages and unique content manifestations that Chinese students may encounter after moving to Germany. It is based on Oberg's theory of culture shock. They will encounter four main phases that could occur: the honeymoon, shock, adjustment, and adaptation stages. Immersion in the host culture, a string of melancholy experiences like loneliness, realizing the necessity for change, and a gradual assimilation into the local way of life are each depicted separately. This analysis is helpful in helping international students learn how to manage their anxiety, adapt to challenges, and cope with the manifestations of culture shock. It also offers lessons on how to better deal with culture shock and ease the transition to studying abroad.

Keywords: Chinese international students, German, Culture Shock, Adaptation process, Challenge.

1. Introduction

Oberg coined the term "culture shock" to describe the psychological effects of cultural maladjustment on expatriates, which include despair and worry over the unknowns of a new setting. [1]. He delineated four stages of changing stress levels over time based on the U-curve theory. But his theory of four standard stages is actually oversimplified, even though sojourners or international students do experience anxiety in the host culture [2].

Second, despite its popularity, the U-curve model suffers from two rather obvious flaws: First, the empirical study by Lysgaard lacks a longitudinal design, which makes its conclusions seem overly broad. A longitudinal design is "more appropriate for exploring changes in the long-term adaptation process." Furthermore, the U-shaped curve fails to account for the contextual factor—that is, the duration of a sojourner's or international student's stay abroad—because there could be notable variations in the adjustment patterns of temporary versus permanent residents. [3].

Ward et al. designed the "ABC model", which consists of three components that address people's feelings, behaviors, and perceptions when they are affected by a second culture, and is a further development of culture shock. With the use of this model, cross-cultural transition may be investigated from two angles: the sociocultural angle, which entails adjusting to a new way of life, and the psychological angle, which is concerned with happiness and well-being during the adaptation process [2].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture Shock

In a short descriptive paper, Oberg coined the phrase "culture shock." According to Oberg, "the anxiety that arises from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse precipitates culture shock." Oberg defines culture shock as the experience people get when they abruptly move to a foreign nation. Similar to the majority of illnesses, it possesses unique signs, causes, and treatments.

Numerous academics agreed with Oberg's theory. Kenneth, for example, noted that culture shock is common among travelers and that when someone is under stress, their ability to adjust socio-personally is reduced and they may exhibit behavioral problems or neurotic symptoms. In agreement, Adler said that "culture shock is primarily a collection of emotional reactions to the misunderstanding of new and varied experiences, to novel cultural stimuli that have little or no significance, and to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture" [4].

2.2. Definition of International Students

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines international students as individuals who journey to a foreign country for the sake of pursuing higher education. German definitions of "foreign students" include "mobile foreign students," who come to study there, and "non-mobile foreign students", who have completed German secondary school and most likely have German residency status. Students who are long-term or permanent residents without German citizenship are thus included in the data [5].

3. Theories of Intercultural Adjustment

3.1. Models of Adjustment

Culture shock occurs in four stages: The phrase "cultural shock" was coined by anthropologist Oberg, who defined it as "anxiety that arises from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse." These indicators or cues cover the various ways we orient ourselves to everyday events [5]. These four stages are Honeymoon, Crisis of shock, adjustment and adaptation. Although these four stages are not equivalent to the U-shaped curve that will be mentioned later, they have a certain similarity in terms of state. Because this model was proposed relatively early and is somewhat biased toward cross-sectional studies, it is not representative of the majority of the group, for example, it is not possible to differentiate between the effects of length of residence of sojourners on status and stage.

The U-shaped curve/U-curve model has been a much studied topic in the study of the adjustment process during the past forty years. The U-shaped curve was first proposed by Lyysgaard in 1955, based on a survey of 200 Norwegian Fulbright recipients who had previously attended US universities. Change "is felt to be easy and successful to begin with; then follows a 'crisis' in which one feels less well adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community [5]." This is how the model describes the process of adjustment.

"Curvilinear model" is the second model as shown in Figure 1. The U-shaped curve/U-curve model has been a much studied topic in the study of the adjustment process during the past forty years. The U-shaped curve was first proposed by Lyysgaard in 1955, based on a survey of 200 Norwegian Fulbright recipients who had previously attended US universities. A "crisis" in which one feels less well adjusted, a little lonely, and unhappy ensues before one finally starts to feel more adjusted again and becomes more integrated into the foreign culture is how the model describes adjustment: "it is felt to be easy and successful to begin with. [5] "

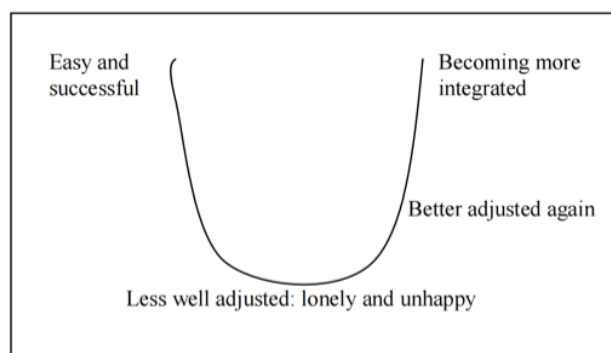


Figure1. U-shaped curve of adjustment put forward by Lysgaard [5]

"ABC model" is the third model. Strong psychological theories could not provide enough direction for the investigation of "culture shock," according to Furnham and Bochner's 1986 hypothesis [6]. Subsequently, Ward et al. devised the "ABC model," which encompasses three components addressing individuals emotions, behaviors, and cognitions when influenced by a second culture, marking a further advancement in the theory of culture shock.

The emotional aspect of cross-cultural interaction closely resembles Oberg's original description of "culture shock" as buzzing disorientation [6]. Oberg's focus was on individuals who find themselves disoriented in unfamiliar environments. As frequently noted, emotions such as fear, loss, confusion, and even avoidance are prevalent.

The definition of cultural learning, which is a continuation of the social skills approach and is based on Michael Argyle's model of interpersonal behavior as a mutually skilled performance, is linked to the behavioral aspect of "culture shock" [6]. International students or sojourners who are not familiar with the culture face difficulties in building and sustaining healthy relationships with local hosts in strange environments. In unfamiliar settings, international students or sojourners lacking culturally relevant social skills and knowledge encounter challenges in establishing and maintaining balanced relationships with hosts from the host country.

The third component is the cognitive element. Our primary focus lies in the interpersonal emotional connections arising from cultural contact, as well as the changes or resistance to change in the self-constructions of international students [6].

The three methods of cultural adaptation are described as follows: Firstly, the cultural learning approach is associated with mastering behaviors and social skills that are closely linked to linguistic and cultural norms. Its goal is to make it possible for overseas students to adjust to a new cultural setting rapidly. Many variables, including the length of time spent immersed in the cultural milieu of the host nation and the growth of the students' own cross-cultural competency, may have an impact on this process.

Second, cross-cultural adaptation is seen by the stress and coping strategy as a psychological adjustment process that is accompanied by notable changes in content and lifestyle.. How international students cope with these stresses is influenced by multiple factors, including their personality traits, locus of control, and ways of dealing with anxiety and homesickness [2].

Lastly, social identity theory focuses on the cognitive aspects related to individual characteristics. Compared to the cultural learning strategy, social identity theory places greater emphasis on inherent individual traits rather than the learning process itself [2].

3.2. Summary of Models

The U-curve model, which can represent the cross-cultural phases that international students must go through when studying abroad, correlates to the four-stage model. . The ABC theory serves as a further refinement and rigorization of the Crisis-Induced Stress Theory and the U-Curve Model. We posit that the ABC Model of Cultural Adaptation effectively addresses the lack of temporal longitudinality in the Culture Shock Theory, providing a more comprehensive consideration of the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive components of the cultural adaptation process. Most importantly,

it illustrates the transition of international students or sojourners from initial maladjustment and anxiety during cultural contact to gradual adaptation.

4. Phases of Culture Shock

4.1. Definition of Honeymoon

The first phase, known as the "honeymoon period," is marked by joy and hopefulness, or, more specifically, a general feeling of pleasure about moving to a new nation. This usually results in an overly optimistic assessment of the new surroundings. Depending on the surroundings, the first stage might last anywhere from a few days or weeks to six months. After this stage, there is a transition to the second stage, which can be compared horizontally to the feeling of "the party's over" (Cieri, Dorlin and Taylor, 1991) [7]. Other scholars have also examined the entire process in a similar manner to Oberg, albeit with different terminology. Different scholarly expressions also tend to point to the honeymoon period as a relaxing experience.

4.2. Performance in Honeymoon and Reasons

During the enchanting honeymoon period, students are brimming with wonder and eagerness as they explore their novel living and academic surroundings. They eagerly sample German cuisine, eagerly tour museums and iconic landmarks, immersing themselves in the culture. This phase is typically marked by an optimistic and proactive demeanor, akin to the excitement of embarking on a thrilling journey. Given Germany's distinct geographical landscape and rich cultural tapestry, the allure of captivating scenery and timeless historical architecture offers an unparalleled and transformative life experience, starkly different from the familiarity of Chinese terrain and traditions.

4.3. Crisis of Shock

There are some possible performance in Phrase 2. Culture shock can also be called culture shock. "Shock" refers to a kind of cellular acute hypoxia syndrome in which various strong pathogenic factors act on the organism, causing the circulatory function to decrease sharply and the microcirculation of tissues and organs to suffer from serious insufficiency of microcirculation perfusion, which manifests itself as coma and hypoxia [8]. In the face of culture shock, the international student community is confronted with a state of psychological shock similar to pathological shock. Even while the first few months are filled with joy and wonder, these feelings soon give way to worry and a yearning to travel. International students, for instance, experience severe feelings of alienation, homesickness, and anxiety when they are separated from their family and friends in the host nation's culture and way of life. Or overseas students have emotions of abandonment or exclusion due to their inability to adjust to the social structure and system of the host nation [9]. This includes the specific minutiae of life after arriving in a foreign country - the interpersonal relationship of sharing a room, the inconvenience of transportation, and the language barrier.

In the case of depression and frustration at being out of step with the host country, we believe that there are three more important causes. There are differences in values between people, as well as deviations or even complete oppositions of values between different countries and regions. Between China and Germany there are differences in, for example, interpersonal relationships, the concept of time, work-life balance and so on. These differences can be down to daily behaviors and habits, which together reflect the differences in values.

Chinese people emphasize the importance of "relationships", which can also be called "connections", and human contacts are the most common form of interaction. German society, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of personal privacy and prefers the concept of an independent family to the Chinese concept of visiting friends and consolidating family ties during the holiday season. In the concept of time, the most common word used by the Chinese is "more or less", which means that there is no specific time standard, but each person knows exactly what the other means.

The Germans, on the other hand, have a strict control of time precision, for example, at a dinner party, guests generally can't come to the door in advance, and need to arrive five minutes after the time node provided by the other party, which, of course, also involves a difference in cultural habits between the two countries - the Chinese emphasize the first time to show respect, while the Germans focus on the time of the node. In terms of work-life balance, China's most representative policy is the "compensatory holiday", i.e., adjusting rest time and using weekends to make up for working days. Germans, on the other hand, make a strict distinction between working days and rest days.

When international students first arrive in unfamiliar countries, due to the collective living habits of their own people and their dependence on their peers, they tend to look for Chinese friends and form the pattern of "group living" in order to gain a sense of security and comfort. Although they choose to study abroad on their own initiative, they are often in a passive state of acceptance in terms of cross-cultural adaptation. They tend to avoid unfamiliar people and things, which limits their chances of gaining a deeper understanding of the country's cultural characteristics and social norms. Therefore, when interacting with foreign friends, once the other party's behavior is very different from their expectations or their requests are rejected, international students are prone to feel aggrieved, frustrated, sad and disappointed, thus experiencing the phenomenon of culture shock [8].

Many students from collectivistic cultures often find it challenging to live independently and lack the necessary survival skills for an individualistic society. They may struggle to adjust to living conditions, such as leasing an apartment and adhering to the rules set by the apartment owners. Additional obstacles include unfamiliarity with public transportation, lack of knowledge about food outlets and prices, and restricted shopping hours [10].

4.4. Adjustment

The weather in Germany is mostly cloudy and rainy, with limited sunshine, so the natural environment in Germany can easily lead to depression. Chinese students in Germany are faced with very strict academic requirements, a foreign country and culture shock, students will choose to change and adjust in order to continue their studies in Germany.

There are three approaches to adjusting to new cultural contexts; in this case, we will concentrate on just one of them, called "cultural learning." Social and experimental psychology have had a significant influence on the "cultural learning" approach. Argyle's 1969 study on social interaction served as a major source of inspiration. The strategy highlights that the secret to gaining the knowledge is to learn about the host culture [9]. It gives special focus to how people who are temporarily living in a different environment acquire new abilities appropriate for that setting. Lack of knowledge of the host culture frequently makes it difficult to establish rapport with their native students. However, their poor social skills and limited language proficiency in the new nation can make them face difficulties in social interactions.

In such a context, "shock" is seen as a stimulus that motivates people to interact positively in the new cultural environment and to work towards acquiring the required competencies. It is recommended that sojourners get knowledge of the key aspects of the new culture from people in the host community. But adjusting to a new culture requires much more than just picking up the language; it also entails developing a deeper comprehension of the accepted norms, laws, and practices of that country. Gaining this expertise can help immigrants comprehend various behavioral patterns in the host culture and prevent misinterpretations of nonverbal cues including body language, gestures, and facial expressions [9].

In contrast, the study conducted by Bochner, McLeod, and Lin highlighted the value of cross-cultural friendships in helping people adapt to a new environment and develop new social skills. Furthermore, Ward et al. pointed out that friendships among students are frequently triangular in nature: they comprise monocultural networks made up of other sojourners, bicultural networks made up of both hosts and sojourners, and larger networks made up of friends and acquaintances from various ethnic backgrounds [9]. Students are typically better equipped to handle sociocultural transition if they have established and extensive relationships with members of the host society;

Students who have extensive and well-established contacts with members of the host society are usually better able to cope with sociocultural adjustment; conversely, those who are primarily in contact only with their compatriots are likely to experience more challenges in sociocultural adjustment.

International students often begin to make changes after experiencing culture shock, such as taking part-time jobs to strengthen their language skills, forcing themselves to break away from “group living” and develop friendships with local students, and actively participating in school seminars. International students also pay attention to how the host country's population communicates or uses idiomatic expressions in their daily life.

4.5. Adaptation

In the process of gradual adaptation, international students may become accustomed to and adopt some of the host country's lifestyles and communication characteristics, certainly after they realize that they should incorporate the culture of the host country into a long-term lifestyle. According to the stress-adaptation-growth model, we have learned that stimulating adaptability gives international students the strength to move forward with their lives and solve challenges. After overcoming challenges multiple times, students develop a sense of upward mobility, they gradually gain confidence in their new daily lives, and they are empowered to cope with the challenges of their academic and social environments. Students feel increasingly linked to the university as they get more active in campus life and start forming positive ties in the host nation [10]. Naturally, a person's connection to the university deepens as they get more involved on campus, form closer friendships, and cultivate ties with staff and teachers. Pupils could think they've adjusted to their new environment well. At this point, individuals might feel that the customs of their native nation are no longer entirely recognizable to them, and they might be less dependent on their parents and previous classmates.

5. Conclusion

This section presents an analytical summary of the academic adaptation among Chinese students in Germany, highlights the strengths and limitations of this study, and proposes future research directions. Firstly, the state of Chinese students in Germany often follows the four stages outlined in the Culture Shock Theory: initial fascination with a different culture upon arrival, which is typically short-lived as most Chinese students focus on passing language exams and training before departing, leaving them unfamiliar with local transportation, weather, people, cultural history, including academic atmosphere, resulting in a “hard landing” and subsequent culture shock. However, through gradual proficiency in German, Chinese students attempt to change their circumstances, transitioning from adjustment to adaptation. Initially, they may struggle to adapt to classroom instruction due to differences in Eastern and Western educational concepts and methods, but eventually come to enjoy the academic atmosphere in Germany.

The analytical strength of this thesis lies in its longitudinal connection to the development of the Culture Shock Theory, exploring and analyzing the adaptation and cultural challenges that Chinese students in Germany encountered within a dynamic and continuously evolving theoretical framework. Detailed descriptions of the four basic stages are provided, along with specific behaviors and coping strategies exhibited by students at each stage. Additionally, one specific method from the ABC Model is incorporated into the longitudinal analysis.

While this thesis achieves its predetermined objectives, there are some limitations. Chinese students constitute a large population, and many return home after completing their studies in Germany. This thesis does not encompass or analyze the reverse culture shock stage they may face upon returning, which would have provided a more comprehensive analysis of the cultural adaptation and international students' experienced challenges.

References

- [1] Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical anthropology*, (4), 177-182.
- [2] Fitzpatrick, F. (2017). Taking the “culture” out of “culture shock”—a critical review of literature on cross-cultural adjustment in international relocation. *Critical perspectives on international business*, 13(4), 278-296.
- [3] Quan, R., He, X., & Sloan, D. (2016). Examining Chinese postgraduate students’ academic adjustment in the UK higher education sector: A process-based stage model. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(3), 326-343.
- [4] Yue, Y., & Le, Q. (2012). From cultural shock to abc framework: development of intercultural contact theory. *International Journal of Innovative Interdisciplinary Research*, 2, 133-141.
- [5] Zhu, J. (2012). Academic adjustment of Chinese students at German universities.
- [6] Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2020). *Psychology culture shock*. Routledge.
- [7] Naeem, A., Nadeem, A. B., & Khan, I. U. (2015). Culture shock and its effects on expatriates. *Global Advanced Research Journal of Management and Business Studies*, 4(6), 248-258.
- [8] Deng W. Causes and Countermeasures of Culture Shock among International Students [J]. *Journal of Hubei Second Normal University*, 2012, 29 (03): 68-69.
- [9] Przyłęcki, P. (2018). International students at the Medical University of Łódź: adaptation challenges and culture shock experienced in a foreign country. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 7(2), 209-232.
- [10] Anjalin, U., Mazumdar, A., & Whiteside, E. (2017). Asian students’ experience of culture shock and coping strategies. *Journal of Education and Social Development*, 1(1), 7-13.