Deconstructing Cultural Stereotypes to Improve International Students’ Interculturality: A Short-term Experimental Approach in a Malaysian Pre-France Programme

Regis Machart, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia
Atafia Azzouz, Universiti Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Malaysian Pre-France programmes prepare Malaysian students to study at a French university. Students are prepared in intensive language courses, as well as mathematics and science in line with the French curriculum. The teaching staff members include French citizens and other nationals, native and non-native speakers, members of the ethnic minorities from France. Malaysia itself is a multicultural country and highly diverse in terms of language, ethnicity, religion, etc. The authors’ expectations were that the convergence of these French-speaking lecturers with students from a ‘culturally’ diverse environment would entail a certain form of fluidity in approaching the ‘culture’ of the host destination. However, their experiences during the required DELF, a diploma awarded by the French Ministry of Education to prove the French-language skills of non-French candidates, demonstrate that the representations of France remain rather static and ‘traditional’. Such representations generate some anxiety for the students before they travel abroad. In an attempt to evaluate the impact of these representations and the students’ readiness to meet ‘culturally different others’, the authors conducted a small scale experiment with final semester students who were about to leave for France two months. They first administrated a questionnaire to 21 students for the purpose of revealing the students’ latent representations of their host destination. The participants then followed a lecture in order to deconstruct their original representations, and asked to write a report in French on this experiment. Results show that the long-term exposure to ‘visible’ diverse speakers has little effect on the participants in terms of moving away from cultural stereotypes, but that a relatively short but explicit intervention has a rather significant impact on the participants’ representations. The authors conclude that only a pro-active, deconstructive and explicit course of action can enable learners to move away from widespread stereotypes, and that a fluid intercultural awareness on the part of lecturers is crucial.

KEYWORDS

Academic Mobility, Cultural Stereotypes, Deconstructivism, Intercultural Competence, Student Preparation

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, 55,600 Malaysians were registered in a higher institution outside the country. Malaysia ranked 8th on the list of countries of origin of mobile students worldwide, following China, India, the Republic of Korea, Germany, Saudi Arabia, France, and the United States (Unesco Institute of Statistics, s.d.). Given the population of Malaysia (30.6 million in 2015), the only country in the
Top 10 which has a similar number of nationals who study overseas was Saudi Arabia (62,500 for 31.5 million inhabitants) - a country that enjoys a GDP per capita which is 250% times higher than Malaysia. These statistics reveal that student mobility represents a priority for the country; indeed the internationalization of higher education has always been linked to Malaysia both as an outbound (Welsch, 2011, 2012; Machart & Dervin, 2014), and more recently as in inbound country, as Malaysia intends to become a new Eduhub (Welch, 2011; Knight, 2011; Machart & Dervin, 2014).

Traditionally, academic ties with the Anglosphere due to a colonial past, a higher education inspired by the UK (Welch, 2011) and a rather high proficiency in English (McArthur, 2002) encouraged Malaysian students to opt for English-speaking countries (Australia, UK and USA). Since the Middle Ages, Egypt has been the major destination of scholars who wanted to study Arabic and religion (Welch, 2012), but the recent situation in the Middle East pushed the government to look for a more stable destination and Jordan became an alternative. A new turn occurred in Malaysia in the 1980s because the then Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir wanted to counterbalance the overwhelming English-speaking influence in the country and was looking for new economic partners (Ruhanas, 2002, p. 34). He therefore implemented the teaching of ‘international languages’ in selected high schools, i.e. French, Japanese and later on German, and two universities developed a complete programme in Bahasa-Bahasa Asing [foreign languages] (Lim & Machart, 2013). There was a lack of instructors for these new languages and selected teachers of other subjects were chosen to go overseas to study these languages, and become teachers of these new subjects (Riget, 2014).

Parallel to curricula designed for these language trainees, different programmes were created mainly for sciences students who had been selected to further their studies in the countries in question. For example, the British Malaysia Institute (BMI), the German Malaysia Institute (GMI), the Malaysia Spain Institute (MSI) and the Malaysia France Institute (MFI) now offer a syllabus which combines language courses and mathematics/sciences training in adequacy with the respective national secondary programmes. The same type of programmes now also exists for future language teachers who undergo selection and a special training in the Institut Penguruan Bahasa-Bahasa Antarabangsa or IPBA [Institute of Teacher Education, International Languages]. The existence of these programmes implies that providing significant linguistic skills, a certain form of knowledge of the host country and an academic education can facilitate mobile students’ integration in their new environment (Machart & Lim, 2014).

With the exception of IPBA students for whom the impact of these programmes has been partially studied (Calinon, 2014; Volle, 2014; Riget, 2014; Machart & Lim, 2014), very little is known about the preparation of Malaysian students who are going to study in a ‘less conventional’ country as well as their intercultural adaptation in the new environment. Although the idea of developing intercultural skills is recurrent in foreign language teaching in Malaysia (e.g. Chin, 2013; Machart & Chin, 2014), foreign language lecturers seem to be confused about what they are expected to develop and how to do it (Chin, 2013). In the case of future mobile students, the question is critical as interculturality in a different language does not remain purely theoretical but needs to be practically applied on a daily basis once the students are overseas. Research increasingly addresses the question of intercultural adjustment of different mobile populations (e.g. Gu, 2009; Guan, 2010; Cadman & Song, 2012; Yang, 2014; Gomes, 2015) but thus far, the emphasis has been on life experience in situ.

This article questions the notion of intercultural competence and how intercultural skills have been developed in a Pre-France programme for future science students in Malaysia. It also reports on a short-term experiment to deconstruct cultural stereotypes with two groups of Malaysian students from this programme who are on the verge of leaving for France, and the output of this study.

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND DEFICIENCY

In analyzing questionnaires given to students who participated in academic mobility in one of the branch campuses of a university, Normand-Marconnet (2015) concludes on the necessity to develop
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