Chapter 9

Experiential Learning Opportunities: Removing Language Barriers and Maximizing Cultural Immersion

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how international students use experiential learning to improve their Chinese language skills through cultural immersion in China. This experiential learning mobilizes them to practice their Chinese communication skills in authentic context and in real use. Furthermore, they immerse themselves in the cultural context, reflecting on language and cultural differences, appreciating cultural diversities, and improving communicative competence. Using a qualitative method, the researcher collected data from various sources about six international students from five countries. The subjects’ real-life experiences mirror their daily activities. Using Nvivo 11 as a tool, the researcher critically analyzed data, categorized contents into emerging themes. The project outcomes are useful for international students currently studying in China to reflect on their past experiences and are also beneficial to those who want to join study abroad and mobility programs, better prepare themselves for language learning and cultural immersion in China in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

The past three decades witnesses the amazing social, economic, cultural and educational achievements China has ever scored in its history. This all-around success is appealing more and more to people from different countries and cultures around the world to one of the oldest civilizations. They travel and see China for business, teaching, tourism, and study purposes. Learning Chinese as an L2 and understanding Chinese culture through an in-country experience are two major motivations driving international student mobility.

BACKGROUND

Internationalization of Higher Education (HE) in China is progressing (Yang, 2016) and the reputation of Chinese education internationalization has been on the increase in the last 20 years (1996-2016). This can be seen in the following perspectives according to Chinese Scholars Abroad (2017). First, the annual number of the source countries these students come from and the international students studying in China has been increasing. The year 1996 saw 114 countries and 4,307 students respectively, but 2016 witnessed 184 countries and 48,981 students, 11.4 times more than 1996.

The total number of international students studying in China has reached 116,798 in the past 20 years, 3.7 times more than 31,699 students in a span of 45 years from 1950-1995. The Chinese Government has increased the 69 authorized universities based in 17 provinces to 279 in 30 provinces. The scholarship-based academic disciplines international students choose to study in China have expanded from humanities to other fields such as management, economics, medical sciences, and legal studies. The number of programs and units offered at Chinese universities are growing fast as well to meet the learning needs of international students and to increase international engagement with universities in other countries (Botha, 2016).

This chapter explores how experiential learning is used as a dynamic vehicle by which international students living in China improve their Chinese language skills, remove the communication barriers, and maximize the potential cultural immersion benefits. It begins with a literature review to provide a theoretical foundation on which data discussion is based. Then comes the methodology description, data collection, and data analysis followed by two research questions. The discussion section is focused on the major findings. The chapter ends with a conclusion in which future research in proposed.
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