

A STUDY ON LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF VIETNAMESE MASTER STUDENTS IN THE FIELD OF ENGINEERING AT A TAIWAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the learning experiences of Vietnamese master students in the field of engineering at a Taiwan university to offer a well-known perception of learning experiences for Vietnamese prospective engineering students who look for foreign degrees in non-English-speaking Asian countries like Taiwan. Interviews with 14 master students were undertaken. The findings reveal that the Vietnamese students experience with 3 types of language-related problems in Taiwan: English language proficiency, lack of English medium of instruction from the host, and Chinese language issues. However, these language-related problems seem not to affect seriously their academic performance since they are in engineering disciplines, considered as linguistically less demanding courses, as well as study and live in Chinese environment. The study, therefore, argues that for Vietnamese students who want to enroll in English-taught programs in non-English-speaking Asian countries, they should think there may be other types of unexpected language-related problems they have to experience beyond English language proficiency. Based on research findings, suggestions for prospective Vietnamese students are also proposed in this study.

Keywords: *learning experiences, Vietnamese students, engineering disciplines, Taiwan*

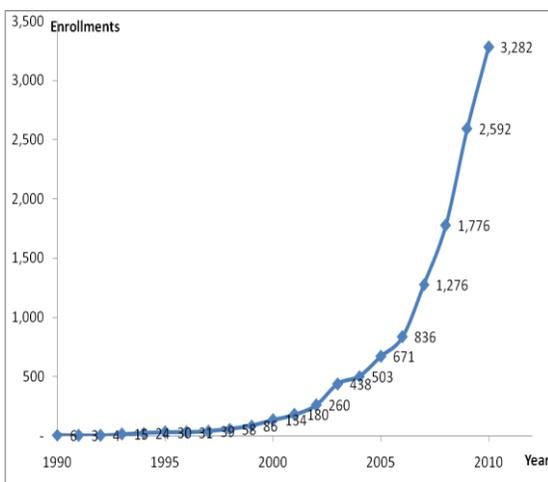
1. Introduction

Along with expansion in the number of young people going overseas for degrees, studies on international students' issues have been addressed. Since English is the current lingua franca, issue of whether the host countries have offered English-taught programs is considered by those students who intend to study in non-English speaking countries. Though the traditional pattern of student mobility is from developing countries to the United States or Western countries (de Wit, 2008), the merging potential players in

Asian countries, such as China, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and South Korea are noted (Lasanowski, 2009). In Taiwan, there has been significant increase in the number of international students, especially since Taiwan government launched the Taiwan Scholarship Program in 2004 to provide financial incentives for Taiwan universities to recruit international students (Lo, 2009). Among origins of sending students to Taiwan, Vietnam considered as a significant figure due to the fastest increase in the number (see Figure 1).

In 2010, Vietnam was ranked at top 2, followed by Malaysia, with 3,282 enrollments (Taiwan MOE, 2010). In the context of increasing number of international students in Taiwan, the question of exploring the learning experiences of international students must be addressed to provide feedbacks for the host in internationalizing its higher education as well as offering sui-table support programs for international students. In addition, it also provides information for prospective students to have well-preparation for their study abroad. Therefore, this study aims to explore the learning experiences of Vietnamese master students in the field of engineering at a Taiwan university to offer a well-known perception of learning experiences for Vietnamese prospective engineering students who look for foreign degrees in non-English-speaking Asian countries like Taiwan.

Figure 1: Vietnamese Student Enrollments in Taiwan Universities



(Source: Taiwan MOE, 2008 and 2010)

2. Literature review on learning experiences of international students

Learning experiences have been well-recognized in the literature with such challenges for international students to experience and adjust to the host environ-

ment. As early as 1982, in a study of Church who reviewed the adjustment of foreigners, it was found that international students in a variety of host countries faced with the same problems over the last 30 years. The most challenges identified were language difficulties, adjustment to new educational system, financial problems, personal problems, and social adjustment (Church, 1982). Over the next 20 years, the problems facing international students, which reported on a number of studies on learning experiences, were mainly the same to what Church listed in his review in 1982. These challenges were also language difficulties, academic stress, academic workload, adjusting to the host culture, financial problems, and so on (e.g., Brown, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Wan, 2001; Warwick, 2006).

Among challenges felt by international students in the host, language-related issues were unavoidable their experiences in both academic study and social life. They included difficulties in listening and speaking, difficulties in understanding slang, idioms, common vocabulary, and topics of conversations, English academic writing and reading, and lack of confidence in using English in daily life (e.g., Brown, 2008; Kwiper & Tan, 2007; Pan et al., 2008; Warwick, 2006). However, in a study on language problems faced by Chinese students in Australia, Zhang and Mi (2009) pointed out another look at these issues toward different disciplines. For students in linguistically less demanding courses, though they still face with difficulties in listening and speaking, English language problems seem not to affect seriously their academic performance and

these issues are nearly gone after 2 years of stay in the host (Zhang & Mi, 2009).

Apart from the international students' feelings toward their English language proficiency, they may face with challenges from the host academic environment through teamwork and class discussions. For instance, in a study given by Taras and Rowney (2007), they stated that international students are likely to speak less than local students in class discussions or group meetings due to inequalities in language proficiency. As a result, they may be evaluated as less active participation in class discussions which result in lower academic performance by team-mates and teachers. Taras and Rowney (2007) also pointed that international students are likely to be paid less attention, even may be interrupted, by team-mates when they share their opinions. Consequently, the cross-cultural opinions among members in groups are not shared effectively as well as valuable ideas may be ignored (Taras & Rowney, 2007).

With such challenges felt by international students, they also have their own experiences to adjust in the host. For example, students from non-English speaking background often joined into groups with their conational students to react to language problems in English-speaking countries (e.g., Brown, 2008; Kuiper & Tan, 2007; Singh, 2005). Due to low English language proficiency, they often felt low self-confident in speaking English and making friends with local people (Singh, 2005). Despite seeking English environment to improve English language, they spent less time to speak English language (Kuiper &

Tan, 2007). Apart from lectures, the international students often spent time on campuses. Their free time was used mainly in the libraries or computer labs for self-study. Lack of engagement with local communities was another common picture of international students stay in the host. The students, therefore, missed chances to perfect their English (Kuiper & Tan, 2007).

Though literature on learning experiences of international students is rich, there are also some gaps in the literature motivating for this research to be conducted. Firstly, most of studies on learning experiences of international students mainly focus on those in English-speaking countries. Therefore, exploring the experiences of those in non-traditionally desirable destinations, such as Taiwan, Korea, and Japan in which English is used as second language for both the students and instructors, is really wanting. Secondly, Vietnamese students though are well-recognized in pursuing foreign degrees, surprisingly to be noted that little information is know about their experiences in the host. Finally, while engineering disciplines are considered as linguistically less demanding courses, the perceptions of engineering students may be different from others in linguistically demanding courses. However, there has been lack of literature on learning experiences of international students in particular field. This study, therefore, attempts to address these gaps.

3. Research method

3.1. Research Design

The study employed semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Based on the purpose of the study, interview schedule was also

proposed and passed to participants in advance. There are 3 parts in the interview schedule. First, the participants' background details were collected. Second, the views of the participants regarding their experiences in academic and social life after arrival in Taiwan were sought. Finally, the participants' experiences regarding using languages in a non-English-speaking Asian country like Taiwan were also examined.

Participation in the research was voluntary. The participants were selected from a Taiwan university in the South of Taiwan through snow-ball sampling. Initial participants introduced their friends to participate in the study. All participants were informed in advance the interview schedule as well as the purpose of the study. The interviews were taken in Vietnamese, the first language for both participants and the researcher. The interviews, which were taped, ranged from 24 minutes to 1 hour 8 minutes in length. The tapes then were transcribed and translated into English.

3.2. Participants

The 14 Vietnamese students, who were studying master programs in engineering disciplines at a Taiwan university, were invited to join this study. All participants obtained full scholarships as international students in Taiwan. At the time of this research, they ranged from 23 to 28 years of age, with 12 males and 2 females. They had stayed in Taiwan from 2 months to 20 months as well as had studied and had been studying Chinese language since they came to Taiwan. Six of the students were in their first semester of university study, three in their second, and five in their fourth semester (who nearly finish their master programs). Thirteen participants were studying in classes in which there were more Vietnamese international students. The one remain student was studying in the faculty that have a few international students reported different experiences from the rest. The profile of sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' demographic characteristics

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Discipline	Residence year(s)	Learning Chinese month(s)
1	Can	Male	24	System Eng.	< 0.5	1
2	Duong	Male	23	System Eng.	< 0.5	1
3	Hao	Male	24	System Eng.	< 0.5	1
4	Long	Male	23	Mechanical Eng.	< 0.5	1
5	Nhu	Female	24	System Eng.	< 0.5	1
6	Toan	Male	26	Mechanical Eng.	< 0.5	1
7	Phi	Male	28	System Eng.	0.5 - 1	6
8	Thong	Male	26	System Eng.	0.5 - 1	6
9	Triet	Male	25	System Eng.	0.5 - 1	6
10	Chinh	Female	25	System Eng.	0.5 - 1	12
11	Linh	Male	25	System Eng.	1.5 - 2	12
12	Quang	Male	26	Information Eng.	1.5 - 2	12
13	Tao	Male	26	System Eng.	1.5 - 2	12
14	Phuc	Male	26	System Eng.	1.5 - 2	12

3.3. Data analysis

Once the transcription was finished, each interview transcript was reviewed several times to be further familiar with all the data. Then, the excerpts of each participant were coded. The study employed a line-by-line coding to analyze the transcripts of the interviews. The concepts emerging from responses of each participant to each question were listed together and ensured inter-coded reliabilities. They were then put into categories whose labels were chosen by the researcher from the pool of concepts discovered in data. Relevant categories were listed together to form a theme. The two themes to be looked for, in the data, were the experiences of Vietnamese master students in academic and social life and the picture of trying making a balance of using languages as international students in Taiwan.

4. Results

4.1. Experiences of Vietnamese master students in academic and social life

4.1.1. Experiences in attending classes

All participants confirmed that they face with English language problems when they attend in classes at the first days. For instance, they felt hard to listen to professors since Taiwanese accents are somewhat different from those of people in English-speaking countries. In class communication, they said that both teachers and students try to understand each other since English is used as second language for both. In addition, lack of academic words also made them get trouble in reading textbooks and academic writing. Therefore, most participants affirmed that they spend much

more time to improve their English at first days. As Linh says,

Because it was the first time I used English in a foreign country, so I felt strange, a little bit nervous to use English and of course I faced with some difficulties at the first days. One of them was the Taiwanese accents. It was quite hard for me to listen to Taiwanese people speaking English. And this made me a few weeks later to feel familiar with their accents.

English language problems still appeared in academic environment during their stay. For participants in classes in which there were more Vietnamese international students, English language was used in their classes while bilingual languages (Chinese and English) were used when they attend to seminars. If lectures were taught in English, their teachers would summarize them in Chinese for Taiwanese students. In contrast, if they were taught in Chinese, their teachers summarized the main points in English for Vietnamese students. Although most of participants affirmed that they still faced with some challenges of using English in scholar environment, English language problems were in acceptable extent as attending classes.

However, for the rest participant in department in which there were a few international students in classes, Quang, language-related problems nearly failed his study. As a minority of students in classes, Chinese language was used as the main medium of instruction in his classes, while English textbooks were provided as references for the courses. Despite of being excited in learning about Chinese and used Chinese more frequently, he could not understand what the lecturers explained and difficulties in joining in class activities. As a consequence, he felt isolated from their

Taiwanese classmates and got bored with their study. Quang describes,

What do you think if you attend classes without understanding what the teachers say? Just staying there and reading materials. I felt bored, isolated from everyone because of difficulties in communication. It somewhat doesn't matter with the courses requiring taking exams for evaluating. But, for some subjects requiring work groups and discussions within members in the groups, it's very difficult because we couldn't communicate together. Finally, I did nothing! ... When I represented, of course I could only use English in reporting, I felt that nobody heard what I said....

4.1.2. Experiences in getting information

Due to lack of English information within campuses, all participants stated that they remain in passive states of receiving information from their faculties and schools. They often got information via a few Taiwanese classmates or their teacher assistants or a few Vietnamese students who had received it before them. Since there is too much Chinese language stated on their schools' websites, it was hard for them to receive information independently. Although all participants have studied Chinese since the first days when they came to Taiwan, their Chinese language proficiency was not enough to read announcements relating to their study procedures or rules for students in university zones.

In regard to using database resources from the library, four participants said that they know how to get, two just knew a little, five did not know, and three did not pay attention about them. Notably, nine participants affirmed that the main resources for their references were from the internet while e-resources from the library had not been explored yet. The main reason given by

these participants was the lack of English version on the library's database. With a few complaints, Linh described what he experienced in using online database. He says,

I think database resources in the library are quite large but I only use 30% of them serving for my research. It's really waste of resources! Because the interface language is Chinese so I'm limited in exploring the database resources. In addition, the way I get the database is because someone guided me to memorize basic operational steps to use Chinese interface, so it's somewhat more limited than you explore it by yourself. Therefore, I'd like to surf the internet to get information rather than using database from the library.

For receiving information, all participants had the same expectation of providing more English language in passing information from faculties to international students. Likewise, English should be used more on campuses. As Phi shares,

The important thing, I think, is providing and passing English information from schools, faculties to international students. As stated in my university offer, English-taught programs are provided for international students. So, I think this also means that information in English is also included in international programs. No matter which languages we use in daily life, we need English language stated on the notice boards or the websites.

4.1.3. Experiences after school time

After classes, most participants often used their free time for self-study and surfing the internet. The main media resources for their entertainment were reading Vietnamese online newspapers, listening to music, and visiting English websites to improve English listening and writing skills. Sports (such as football, badminton, table-tennis, and so on) were also paid more attention as one of the ways they release their stress after studying hard. Vietnamese

international students often engaged with their conational students in participating activities after school time. It is also noted that they spent, on average, 70% of their free time on campuses, mainly in the library or computer labs.

Since Taiwan has Chinese environment while Vietnamese students only used English to communicate with people here, they continued to face with Chinese language problems in daily life. It was very hard for them to go out, especially eating out or shopping because they could know a few Chinese words at the first days of arrival. Wherever they went out, they needed someone who could use Chinese to accompany to them or used body language. As a result, they rarely went out alone. It took them from 3 months to 8 months, mainly for starting learning Chinese language, to start going out independently as well as somewhat get over Chinese language problems in their living. As Duong says,

I have some senior Vietnamese students accompanied me when I go out. They can speak Chinese but I can't. So, I only tell them what I need in Vietnamese and then they help me buy it. Sometimes, I somewhat want to go out alone for eating, like exploring something. The sellers say something but I don't understand what they say. So I often use body language and a few basic Chinese words to tell them what I need. It looks like you order randomly and then ask them how much. That's all.

With respect to making friends with Taiwanese students, all Vietnamese students said that they also have some Taiwanese friends as acquaintances. The reasons recognized were language barriers and the increase in the number of Vietnamese students at the university. Additionally, although Vietnam and Taiwan are Asian

countries, there were some differences in cultures that make Vietnamese and Taiwanese students just remain as acquainted friends, though all participants affirmed that Taiwanese friends are very kind to them. As Linh shares,

Taiwanese friends feel afraid of speaking English while I'm limited in speaking Chinese. Just talking some simple topics! So, it's hard to share something like close friends...

4.2. Trying to make a balance of using three languages as Vietnamese international students in Taiwan

As Vietnamese international students in Taiwan, the participants used at least 3 languages simultaneously: their home language - Vietnamese, the host language - Chinese, and English. Overall, English was used in classrooms, Chinese was used in communication with local people and Vietnamese was used in talking with their conational students. Therefore, the participants were then asked how frequently they evaluated themselves in using these three languages as Vietnamese international students in Taiwan.

For participants who studied at the first year in Taiwan, Vietnamese language was used much more often, after that was English and Chinese, respectively. At the first days of arrival, the participants used mostly body language and somewhat English to let local people understand what they said. As Nhu says,

Because I've just started to learn Chinese, my pronunciation is somewhat incorrect and it makes people don't understand what I say. In contrast, I also don't understand what they say. In short, I mainly use English in attending classes as well as communicating with my roommates. But it's still less than Vietnamese

because there are many Vietnamese students here.

When learning Chinese language about 6 months, the participants could use Chinese at basic level to communicate with the local people. At this period, there were confusions of using Chinese, English, and Vietnamese languages in their study and living. As Triet shares:

Sometimes, I confuse in speaking English, Chinese, and Vietnamese. When I speak English, I confuse some words with Vietnamese. When I speak Chinese, I confuse some words with English. For example, one day my teacher asked me whether I could report or not. I stood up and spoke spontaneously: “Néu (a Vietnamese word means “if” in English) I do, I’ll report to you”. This made my teacher asked me again “What?” ...

For participants who studied at the second year in their master programs, Chinese language was used more frequently than English, followed Vietnamese language. Since they had studied Chinese language for 1 year, their Chinese proficiency was reach to primary level in communication and they did not confuse in using two second languages at all. At this stage, Chinese was used more frequently than English in communication. These participants stated that using Chinese is somewhat more convenient than English in talking something related to their living. As Linh explains,

Because now I use Chinese daily while English is only used in classrooms, and here is Chinese environment so I think using Chinese is somewhat more convenient in my daily life, such as going out and eating. To describe something beyond these topics, I’d like to speak English.

With respect to changes of English language proficiency, all participants overall said that there was marked improvement on

their reading skill, but somewhat decline in speaking skill due to lack of English environment for communication as well as choosing Chinese language to respond in social life.

Turning to Chinese language proficiency, all participants stated that there was significant improvement on their Chinese language skills, especially listening and speaking. Since they had studied or had been studying Chinese, as well as lived in Chinese environment, their Chinese language proficiency improved markedly. However, they also affirmed that their Chinese did not reach to advance levels in order to read the announcements from their schools, faculties or use in classrooms. As Triet says,

Although my Chinese now improves significantly compared to the first days I arrived here, I could only use it in basic communication, mainly in daily life. I think it takes me 5-10 years to learn more Chinese in order to use it in academic environment.

5. Discussion

As international students in Taiwan, the Vietnamese participants experienced with at least 3 types of language-related problems in their academic and social life. They are problems relating their English language proficiency, the host’s problems in providing language medium of instruction, and problems relating their Chinese language proficiency. Like experiences of international students in English-speaking countries (e.g., Brown, 2008; Kuiper & Tan, 2007; Pan et al., 2008; Singh, 2005; Warwick, 2006), the Vietnamese participants faced with common difficulties regarding their English language proficiency, such as difficulties in speaking and listening English, lack of academic words, academic writing, and so on. However, the experiences of

Vietnamese students in Taiwan are different from those in English-speaking countries in terms of continuing facing with two other types of language-related problems: the host's problems in offering English medium of instruction for international students and the host language problems. Beyond lack of English information within campuses, the Vietnamese students, in some cases, may face with incomplete English-taught programs for international students, as a case of the participant Quang in this study. Given this situation, Chinese language is used in classes for both international and local students. With the 2-year period of studying master programs, it seems to not enough for international students start to learn and use Chinese characters in academic environment. Therefore, both English and Chinese language-related issues are really unavoidable in the experiences of Vietnamese master students in Taiwan.

In fact, due to enrolling in engineering disciplines in which language is used less than experiments and practicing as well as lack of English medium of instruction, the factor of English language inequalities did not seriously affected the Vietnamese participants' academic performance since they know what necessary skills for their study. The participants, mostly at the second and fourth semesters in this study, all passed the courses with enough scores for renewing their scholarships. Actually, problems relating their English language proficiency only affected their experiences in terms of spending much more time to have preparation for their courses and the participants could manage them gradually during their stay in Taiwan. However, the

lack of English medium of instruction within campuses was really their unsolvable problems without depending on their length of residence. They were in passive states in receiving information as well as sharing their opinions to others. While international students in English-speaking countries experienced with their co-national students to avoid issues caused by full English environment (e.g., Brown, 2008; Kuiper & Tan, 2007; Singh, 2005), the Vietnamese students in Taiwan joined groups with other Vietnamese students due to lack of English environment and great Chinese medium of instruction.

Through exploring the learning experiences of Vietnamese master students at a Taiwan university, this study also proposes some suggestions for Vietnamese students, who intend to study in Taiwan. Well-preparation in English academic skills is strongly suggested. Chinese language is also needed to communicate with local people. Before departure, Vietnamese students should find some information relating to Taiwan higher education system to propose study plans in advance. The valuable channel to get information is likely the word-of-mouth from senior Vietnam students who have studied or are studying in Taiwan universities. The better Vietnamese students prepare for their languages, the quicker they can adjust to the host.

To date and to the knowledge of the researcher, the study is the first in-depth interpretative research on learning experiences of Vietnamese students in a non-English-speaking Asian country like Taiwan. This study, therefore, is limited in some following aspects. First, the sample size is

quite small and lack of social disciplines as well as only collected in one university in Taiwan. It is suggested to do more research on various samples within Taiwan universities as well as quantitative step to have overall figure of Vietnamese students. Second, all (the majority of) participants in this study has some similar conditions, such as obtaining scholarships, single students, just graduating from Vietnam universities, and having no learning experiences in foreign environment. Therefore, the findings might be different from those who are fee-paying students, who had worked before coming to Taiwan, and who have studied overseas. Third, it is suggested to do more research on learning experiences of the same participants at different stages of their master programs, such as the first days of arrival, during their stay, and nearly graduation to explore how the students experience their academic and social life through each stages of stay in the host.

6. Conclusion

By exploring the experiences of Vietnamese master students in engineering

at a Taiwan university, the study has found that the Vietnamese students experienced with at least 3 types of language-related problems in both their academic and social life, including their English language inequalities, the host's problems in providing English medium of instruction, and Chinese language deficiency. Due to enrolling in linguistically less demanding courses and lack of English medium of instruction, the factor of English language inequalities did not seriously affect the Vietnamese participants' academic performance since they knew what necessary skills for their study. In the views of global languages (such as Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish) challenging the role of English, study in English-taught programs in non-English context is going to be a new trend of student mobility (Lasanowski, 2011). The study, therefore, proposed some suggestions for Taiwan universities in offering appropriate programs for international students as well as for prospective students to have well-preparation for their study aboard in non-English-speaking Asian countries like Taiwan.

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MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ NHỮNG TRẢI NGHIỆM HỌC TẬP CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM THEO HỌC CHƯƠNG TRÌNH THẠC SĨ KỸ THUẬT TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐÀI LOAN

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TÓM TẮT

Bài báo khám phá những trải nghiệm học tập của sinh viên học thạc sĩ ngành kỹ thuật tại một trường đại học ở Đài Loan nhằm cung cấp nhận thức đầy đủ cho những sinh viên Việt Nam tương lai muốn theo học ngành kỹ thuật tại những nước châu Á không nói tiếng Anh. Bài nghiên cứu đã thực hiện phỏng vấn với 14 sinh viên học thạc sĩ. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên Việt Nam đã trải nghiệm với 3 loại trở ngại liên quan đến ngôn ngữ tại Đài Loan: khả năng lưu loát Anh ngữ, thiếu môi trường tiếng Anh từ phía chủ nhà, và những khó khăn về tiếng Hoa. Những khó khăn về ngôn ngữ dường như không ảnh hưởng nghiêm trọng lắm

đến kết quả học tập của sinh viên khối ngành kỹ thuật, những ngành sử dụng ngôn ngữ ít, và lại họ sống và học tập trong một môi trường tiếng Hoa. Bài báo, vì thế, chỉ ra rằng đối với những sinh viên Việt Nam muốn theo học chương trình tiếng Anh tại những nước châu Á không nói tiếng Anh nên nghĩ đến có thể sẽ có nhiều loại khó khăn khác liên quan đến ngôn ngữ mà các bạn không lường trước được, ngoài khả năng lưu loát Anh ngữ. Dựa vào những kết quả nghiên cứu, bài báo này cũng gợi ý một số đề xuất cho các bạn sinh viên Việt Nam tương lai.

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