

Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Language Volunteer Teachers: A Culture Shock Perspective

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Abstract: The issue of Chinese language volunteer teachers' psychological struggles in foreign cultures has gained massive public attention. Meanwhile, few studies explore cross-cultural adaptation struggles with culture shock as the theoretical basis. Hence, this study analyzes the culture shock experienced by Chinese language volunteer teachers in Thailand and seeks corresponding countermeasures. This study argues that culture shock brings setbacks and challenges to Chinese language volunteer teachers, including language barriers, educational philosophy, and social adaptation. It also provides an opportunity for reflection and improvement, making full use of the foundation conducive to improving the individual abilities of Chinese language volunteer teachers and effectively enabling cultural exchange. Based on the analysis, it proposes the following suggestions: volunteer teachers should improve their language skills and abilities, overcome ethnocentric thinking, embrace foreign cultures, and engage in cross-cultural communication with a mindset of respect and equality. In parallel, before going abroad, volunteer teachers should receive targeted training with practical courses, higher salaries, and better benefits.

1. Introduction

Culture shock refers to the deep, hard-to-overcome anxiety and upset caused by strangeness towards new social symbols and the sudden departure from familiar social interaction cues [1]. It is the embodiment of one's inner self when facing cross-cultural conflicts. When an individual steps into a new culture, they might experience culture shock even with sufficient preparations [2]. Culture shock is closely associated with cross-cultural adaptation. The four stages of culture shock, namely the honeymoon, frustration, adaptation, and acceptance, are the classic summary of the stages of cross-cultural adaptation [3]. The process of culture shock signifies the intrinsic process of personal development. It is a process of developing self-understanding, self-awareness, and cultural awareness from lower to higher levels, as well as a process of enhancing an individual's cross-cultural competence and strategic level while responding to the culture of other countries [4]. As Confucius Institutes prosper around the globe, the number of Chinese language volunteer teachers surges as well. How to build a sense of identity in a society with a foreign culture and smoothly navigate through and cope with culture shock have become important research topics with practical

significance. In general, current studies of culture shock focus more on international students, expatriates from multinational companies, and tourists. Few researchers set their sights on the cultural integration barriers of Chinese language volunteer teachers. Hence, this study specifically focuses on the culture shock phenomenon of Chinese language volunteer teachers, seeking solutions for the cross-cultural adaptation challenges that they face.

2. Common Frustrations for Language Teachers Working Overseas

In the cultural context of foreign countries, the teaching motivations and objectives upheld by teachers, as well as their views on education and teaching objects, are often neglected [5]. In Mullock's study about foreign teachers Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) who work in Southeast Asia, it is found that although these teachers have passions for the profession, enjoy cultural integration in foreign countries, and have an intrinsic motivation to work with responsibility and perseverance, they experience many frustrations, such as the challenge of career advancement, unrecognized teaching methods, and a lower status compared to local professionals in the same field. Meanwhile, their employment environment is less than ideal, with invisible discrimination in terms of employment policy and social environment [6]. Similarly, Johnston, Pawan, and Mahan-Taylor conducted a case study, arguing that language teachers face the challenge of being marginalized in society [7]. In this case, an American teacher teaching English in Japan struggled to engage with Japanese culture and society, often becoming marginalized in various aspects. The teacher was unable to achieve better career development due to not being Japanese. Meanwhile, the teacher was often scrutinized and questioned by Japanese people due to the foreigner's identity when trying to integrate into society, a situation that could not be effectively improved despite efforts. The two cases are of universal significance, both indicating the cross-cultural adaptation struggles of second language teachers in a foreign cultural context. This leads to a similar challenge faced by Chinese language volunteer teachers, namely, that they often encounter a sense of mismatch or frustration in their overseas careers. They face the dilemma of cultural conflicts, educational philosophy, and methods conflicts, and marginalization, which are more likely to trigger the culture shock phenomenon during the process of adapting to a new culture.

3. Culture Shock Causes of Chinese Language Volunteer Teachers

This study analyzes the culture shock phenomenon of Chinese language volunteer teachers and identifies the following influencing factors.

3.1. Language Barrier

As the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) develops, the geographic range of Chinese language volunteer teachers also expands by including non-English speaking countries. Particularly, even English-speaking countries have different language habits from China. Although proficient in English, most volunteer teachers are unable to speak the local language in non-English speaking countries and struggle to communicate smoothly with local people, as only a few residents speak English. The lack of language communication skills often results in communication barriers, hinders volunteer teachers from carrying out teaching activities, and reduces the effectiveness of teaching and classroom interaction [8]. For instance, most volunteer teachers in Brazil have lower proficiency in Portuguese and few of them can engage in daily communication in Portuguese. Meanwhile, different language habits hinder normal social life, as verbal communications vary significantly across cultures. This also impedes volunteer teachers from establishing good interpersonal relationships and gaining identity recognition.

3.2. Psychological Disconnection

After separation from the original environment, individuals may experience psychological discomfort or disorders due to detachment from the original social supporting system and cultural identity. The psychological disconnection may manifest as anxiety, depression, and loneliness. While adapting to different cultures, volunteer teachers may feel negative emotions due to psychological disconnection. They may exhibit behaviors such as showing little interest in preserving their original culture or engaging with other groups, refusing to integrate into society, and displaying clear resistance and emotional distance toward interpersonal relationships and the local sociocultural norms.

3.3. Cultural Fixation

Fixation arises in specific social and cultural environments. When people interact with an individual or a group, they tend to identify the type of the group, categorizing their traits and attributing these traits to every member of the group, ultimately developing a fixed mindset about a specific ethnicity or culture in their minds [9]. It is a generalized and simplified summary of an ethnicity. Similar to stereotypes, it is extremely likely to result in cultural prejudice. Cultural prejudice hinders volunteer teachers from objectively assessing actual cultural phenomena and cultural characteristics in everyday life and teaching. Instead, it leads volunteer teachers to develop negative impressions based on prejudgment, thereby triggering cultural shock. Volunteer teachers often neglect the rich diversity and uniqueness of each member within a culture. The generalized and one-sided prejudice leads them to form specific expectations and validate such expectations subconsciously in life and teaching, deliberately ignoring phenomena contradicting their expectations. They also treat colleagues, students, and other people with rigid mindsets, preventing them from building social connections. This makes it difficult to gain the goodwill from people around them, resulting in a sense of alienation.

3.4. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the tendency to favor one's group. Groups exhibiting ethnocentrism take strong pride in their ethnic culture and evaluate other groups and their members using their own group's standards as the benchmark [10]. The ethnocentric mindset argues that "the technical name for the view of things in which one's group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" [11]. It is beneficial for national unity but detrimental to establishing connections with members of other ethnic groups in the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Ethnocentrism also causes volunteer teachers to develop a sense of arrogance during their interactions, unfavorable for fostering closer relationships between individuals [11].

3.5. Strangeness towards Education Philosophy and Teaching Habits

The education philosophy in many countries is notably distinctive from the traditional education philosophy in China. For instance, Thailand attaches high importance to moral education for students and the government places more emphasis on moral education than intellectual education [12]. As a core tool for shaping students' values, Buddhist teachings account for the major content of moral education in schools. Schools also make efforts to foster a sense of national pride among students and require a group chanting session during the flag-raising ceremony at 8 a.m. every morning. Some schools hold morning assemblies with themes such as love for the country, loyalty to the king, and respect for tradition. Although schools in China have patriotism and nationalism

education, the teaching contents, methods, and traditions vary significantly from those of Thailand. Moreover, the educational philosophy in Thailand favors education through entertainment rather than exam-oriented teaching and respects learners' interests and willingness to learn during the teaching process. It follows the learning approach of the new century. The learning is joyful, featuring the active engagement of students. With such an educational context, classes in Thailand's primary and secondary schools are more active without being rigid and dull. Therefore, joyful teaching increases the difficulty of volunteer teachers to arrange teaching. Except for elite schools, key schools, and grades where Chinese is a subject for the college entrance examination, students often exhibit a casual attitude in class and walk around the class, disrupting classroom orders. According to a sample survey, 46.3% of volunteer teachers in Thailand believe that the difficulty in maintaining classroom order stems from students having less interest in the teaching content. As a result, students shift their focus away from the lesson and even exhibit disruptive behavior in class [13]. This shows even classes in countries of Southeast Asia differ significantly from traditional Chinese classrooms. It is difficult for volunteer teachers to shift their educational philosophy in a short period. Some may have tried to adjust teaching strategies. However, due to a lack of experience, their actions often lead to the opposite effect, making it challenging for Chinese language volunteer teachers to gain career satisfaction and advancement opportunities.

3.6. Heavy Workload

The workload that Chinese language volunteer teachers are required to undertake exceeds the normal scope. Taking Thailand as an example, the survey results show that 72% of volunteer teachers in Thailand need to take on teaching responsibilities for 15 to 24 classes per week. 53.2% of volunteer teachers need to teach 6 to 20 classes simultaneously. Students in different grades have different Chinese language levels. Volunteer teachers with less experience often are overwhelmed by the heavy workload, leaving them with little energy to focus on the teaching content and improve their teaching skills [14]. This increases the psychological stress of volunteer teachers. It makes it difficult for them to adjust when experiencing negative emotions, amplifying the sense of frustration caused by culture shock.

4. Impacts of Culture Shock

Traditionally speaking, culture shock is an illness and also an identity crisis, which brings many negative impacts. However, from a different perspective, it can promote individual learning and growth.

4.1. Negative Impacts

Culture shock is a reflection of stress that occurs during cross-cultural adaptation. The anxiety, depression, frustration, and other negative emotions caused by it is an unconscious stress response, inducing a series of negative impacts [15].

Firstly, culture shock often triggers uncontrollable emotional experiences and negative emotions. These negative emotions are fluctuating and extremely unstable, and the individual involved cannot control them. Specifically, ones with culture shock may feel low at times, depressed, and lack the drive to do anything, while at other times may be extremely excited and emotional. The two mental states alter and fluctuate notably, which is damaging to the physical and mental health of volunteer teachers. It could also affect people around them, leaving them with the impression that the person is emotionally unstable, difficult to understand, and hard to get along with.

Secondly, culture shock prevents the development of human perceptual and cognitive assessment abilities. Due to the cultural differences and the ethnocentric mindset, volunteer teachers cannot comprehend some traditional local customs or cultural behavior, considering them as anomalous existence. They are unwilling to adhere to local customs in necessary social interactions, thereby causing cultural conflicts. Volunteer teachers may need a longer time to make appropriate cultural behavior judgments.

Thirdly, cultural shock may cause nervous and anxious emotions in volunteer teachers, which is harmful to healthy physical development. It not only harms cross-cultural communication but also the mental health of volunteer teachers.

Fourthly, culture shock may affect the social behavior of volunteer teachers, leading to instability. For instance, volunteer teachers may show traits such as being untrustworthy, dishonest, irresponsible, and unpredictable in social interactions.

4.2. Positive Impacts

Culture shock can seem like an illness when viewed from a negative perspective. People who experience culture shock can only lead a normal life once they have recovered. However, from a positive perspective, frustrations during the process of cross-cultural adaptation caused by cultural differences are meaningful, which represents a new form of learning and experience and benefits the enhancement of cross-cultural communication skills [16]. Therefore, culture shock is of positive significance.

Firstly, culture shock presents the environment and opportunities for Chinese language volunteer teachers to learn and change, promoting them to learn how to proactively solve problems. It can facilitate volunteer teachers to shift from being scared of unfamiliar environments to achieving self-fulfillment. This challenging task could help volunteer teachers gain a sense of achievement and contentment after overcoming frustrations [17].

Secondly, a certain level of stress and anxiety can enhance learning, unlocking people's potential to learn. The problems caused by culture shock push volunteer teachers to constantly change their ways to adapt to complex environments, thereby improving their communication skills and problem-solving abilities. Simultaneously, different teaching methods and students, compared to those in China, encourage volunteer teachers to continuously refine their teaching competence and proficiency.

5. Insights and Countermeasures

Culture shock is a common phenomenon for Chinese language volunteer teachers during the process of their cross-cultural communication. To smoothly navigate through the frustration stage lays a solid foundation for volunteer teachers to perform their duties well, improve teaching quality, and promote the spread of the Chinese language.

First of all, Chinese language volunteer teachers should improve their language skills in the country they are assigned to through regular language learning. They should be alert to and eliminate ethnocentric thinking, adhere to cultural relativism, be able to understand and appreciate cultural differences and maintain an open-minded approach to new things. They should be aware of the risk of interpreting other cultures' communicative behavior and cultural practices through the lens of their own culture. Meanwhile, according to the four levels of cross-cultural consciousness proposed by Hanvey, volunteer teachers should rationally observe and analyze important and subtle characteristics in foreign cultures, learn to view everything from the perspective of the locals after living in the foreign society for a long time, and ultimately accept foreign cultures [18,19]. According to the Yerkes-Dodson Law, learning efficiency peaks when the learners are at a

moderate level of anxiety. Therefore, this suggests that Chinese language volunteer teachers can maintain a moderate level of anxiety in cross-cultural communication. A high level of anxiety could cause fear of social interactions, leading to the avoidance of building connections with local people in foreign countries. Meanwhile, a low level of anxiety can result in a lack of willingness for cross-cultural communication. Hence, volunteer teachers should appropriately adjust their levels of anxiety and engage in cross-cultural communications with the right mindsets.

Secondly, volunteer teachers should view communications with a mindset of respect, equality, openness, and inclusiveness. They should be willing to express their ideas and listen to others. Cultures and customs that are difficult to understand cannot be simply recognized as bad and foolish customs. Volunteer teachers should understand the deeper meaning of cultural customs using an empathetic approach, care for the feelings and emotions of communication partners genuinely, listen to them attentively, and express goodwill through verbal behaviors.

Before going abroad, volunteer teachers should receive training courses tailored to the actual conditions of the assigned country with an emphasis on localized teaching. According to Landis and Bhagat, cross-cultural training should help trainees fully understand the difference between different cultures, cultivate the ability of inclusiveness and acceptance, develop sensitivity and alertness towards possible cultural conflicts, enable them to adapt to the teaching philosophy and habits in the assigned country in advance, thereby easing the discomfort of volunteer teachers when they perform their duties [20]. Objective information, values, and beliefs of other cultures should be demonstrated in the training courses to reflect cultural information effectively, thereby replacing unrealistic expectations of volunteer teachers with more realistic ones. In addition, salaries and benefits of Chinese language volunteer teachers can be improved and the working environment can be optimized. The problems of younger volunteer teams, insufficient experience, and inconsistent teaching quality should be addressed. These measures will enhance the enthusiasm for teaching and ease the pressure of talent loss due to low payment and cumbersome tasks.

6. Conclusion

This study illustrates the culture shock psychology and the phenomenon of Chinese language volunteer teachers during the process of adapting to other cultures and seeks relevant countermeasures. Culture shock should not be perceived solely in a negative perspective. Frustration can also catalyze reflection and subsequent improvement. Chinese language educators should seek solutions on their own in the face of difficulty, integrate into the cultural context of Thailand with a more inclusive mindset, and successfully perform their duties.

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