



INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INTERACTION PROCESSES IN RELATION TO THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT ONE UNIVERSITY IN NORTHERN CHINA

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Abstract:

This was a qualitative case study, which sought to describe international students' interaction processes in relation to their learning experiences at one university in China. The semi structured interview was used to collect data from international Master students followed by observation on one of the learning activities. The social constructivism theory guided data collection and analysis. It was found that there were differences with regard to how students interacted with instructors and fellow students in terms of means of communication, frequency of interactions as well as feedback. In addition, participants attached intellectual development roles to their interaction with instructors, and social wellbeing roles to peer interaction. On the other hand, cultural background and language barrier influenced their interaction processes at the university.

Keywords: International students' interactions, social interaction, student-instructor interactions, social constructivist learning, international students in China

1. Introduction

This study describes the interaction processes at one university in Northern China with focus on how international students interact with fellow students, as well as their instructors. In addition, it presents findings on the meaning international students attach to the interaction processes in relation to their learning experiences at the institution. In this case study, interaction refers to any kind of social and pedagogical relations whether formal or informal, among students, and between them and their instructors. These relations can be either face to face or at a distance mediated by different media. Social relations are considered as social support systems, which provide opportunities to share experiences, information, and ideas useful to improve

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motivation, learning, as well as to reduce depression. Linked to this, is the concept of pedagogical relations which involves activities like teaching and learning in classroom sessions, seminar discussions, academic consultations, or any other informal discussion, which have a meaningful connection with the intention to improve learning.

So far, learning is the process of growth in knowledge, understandings, and skills over time. The central idea to this notion of learning is the *process* and broad array of *outcome* measures, *attendance*, *participation*, *engagement*, and *motivation* (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), 2011). In this regard, learning is a process as well as an outcome which is related as well as influenced by the above-mentioned concepts. Accordingly, interactions are part of learning processes which have influence on motivation and engagement.

1.1 Interaction and Learning for International Students

Supportive interaction is one of the social, psychological, and academic support systems, which plays a role in acculturation and students' development (Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013). Since, international students are in a new social and cultural environment, their ability to adjust and achieve academic goals in a foreign country is influenced by the nature of social support and their interaction processes with instructors and fellow students (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker & Al-Timimi, 2004). This interaction with others helps to reduce feelings of isolation, homesickness, and helps the adjustment process (Mesidor & Sly, 2016 p.270). In other words, interaction plays a peculiar role to international students' psychological wellbeing as they can share their feelings and feel secure and supportive with people around them (Gebhard, 2012).

Furthermore, Choo and Singh (2013) studied international students in Malaysia and identified that, interaction has positive association with psychological, social, and academic benefits for students. This shows that limited interaction can lead to loneliness and dissatisfaction among students, which in turn affects their motivation to learn. In Thailand, similar findings were reported by Rujipak and Limrasert (2016) that international students with better social cultural adjustments performed better academically than those with poor social cultural adjustment (p.39). Sibley, Hamilton, and Chugh (2015) also found that in Australia international students with high degrees of psychological wellbeing achieved satisfactory academic achievements than those who could not successfully adapt to the host country's way of living.

In addition, Arkoudis and Baik (2014) studied international students in Australian universities and found out that, effective interaction among international students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds lead to a greater feeling of belonging, cultural awareness, and understanding of issues in different perspectives. Likewise, Hee and Woodrow (2008) reported that, through peer interaction, Korean international students in one Australian university, improved different skills like gathering and organizing information from diverse sources, oral presentation competence, exchange information, questioning, as well as critical analysis. Also, Gebhard (2012) found out that group discussion interactions helped international students in US universities to realise their weaknesses in learning and collectively

found ways to improve. Equally, Xin (2013) emphasised that lunch time informal meetings for international students in the UK, helped international students to share information across nations and cultural background which enhanced their understanding.

Similarly, interaction between students and their instructors has proved to yield positive results to international students' learning. According to Hee and Woodrow (2008), in Australia, academic staffs play a big role to international students as instructors, advisors, as well as the sources of support and guidance. In addition to that, Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, and Song (2015) studied two universities in the US and found out that interaction between international students and instructors contributed to students' academic experiences and social adjustment (pp.359-363). Respectively, Endo and Harpel (1982); as well as Andrade (2006) reported that frequent interaction between students and their instructors had greater positive effects on international students' intellectual outcomes. Endo and Harpel maintained that, instructors are good models for students' intellectual growth while peers are best for personal, social, and value related outcomes. All these suggest that interaction among students, also between them and their instructors is very vital for students' positive learning experiences.

However, despite the positive effects of interaction among students and their instructors, there are reported challenges which limit these interactions. For example, cultural background was reported to influence the way international students in Australia, US and England interacted with their instructors and fellow students (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014; Brown, 2009; Chege, 2013; Hee & Woodrow, 2008; Leong, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2011). According to Leong (2015) international students in US universities opted to interact with students from the same nation or from a nation with related culture so as to avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication caused by cultural differences.

In addition to this, in Australia and other English speaking countries, poor English language proficiency was reported to limit classroom interaction among students and instructors (Hee & Woodrow, 2008). Poor English language proficiency was also attributed to international students' difficulty in adjusting to sociocultural situations in the US (Andrade, 2006; Leong, 2015), and thus created a relationship problem which led to loneliness and distress among international students (Ramos, 2014).

In China, not many studies have investigated international students learning experiences. Although the situation might be almost the same with other international students in western countries like US and UK, there remain significant differences in the practise as well as linguistic and cultural environments between them. For example as it was identified by Wang and Li (2016), universities in Shandong province had a distinction in the study and daily life of international students and Chinese students which hindered international students' acculturation (p.127). This exists because international students did not share dormitories with Chinese students. Additionally international students in English taught programmes have separate classes from

Chinese students whose language of instruction is mandarin (Chinese language). Hence, international and local students have little or no cordial relationship.

Few studies have also reported language barriers in both English and Mandarin proficiency as a challenge to international students in Chinese universities. Poor or lack of Mandarin language proficiency by international students in English taught programs limited interaction between them and Chinese students, as well as among them and international students in Chinese taught programs who couldn't speak English (Nyandara, Egbuonu & Zhu, 2015; Zhu & Ma, 2011). Consequently, low mandarin proficiency limited international students' social adjustment (Lawani, Gai, & Titilayo, 2012). On the other hand, English was also a barrier of communication among students, and between them and their instructors. As reported by Zhu and Ma (2011) some international students do not have a decent command of English language, which was also the case of some qualified professors who could not supervise international students in English. All these are some of the situations encountered by international students in China.

2. Theoretical Framework

Constructivism theory has two major strands, which are cognitive constructivism (Piaget), and social constructivism (Vygotsky). Although these strands have slight differences regarding the individual cognitive development, they both agree on the role of interaction in facilitating learning (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). This suggests that, despite the cognitive development of human beings (which involves inner construction process), there are reciprocal negotiations and meaning making which are influenced by social and physical interactions occurring in students' environments (Atherton, 2013; Kim, 2001; Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). This simply means that human cognitive and intellectual development is facilitated by social interaction and active participation in the construction of knowledge.

Social constructivism highlights the role of society in cognitive development and the way individuals understand the world (Kim, 2001). According to social constructivism, interactions facilitate meaningful learning to a greater level compared to what one can learn individually without the assistance from peers or a knowledgeable expert. This is referred to as **zone of proximal development**, which emphasises that, what a learner can do alone is little in comparison to what s/he can do with the assistance of interaction with others (Kim, 2001). This indicates that through interaction with peers or instructors, students get different perspectives and develop the ability to analyse, synthesize, and use the information to guide or regulate own learning cum understanding.

In social constructivism, learning is socially and culturally constructed as individuals actively engage in human activities (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). Consequently, individuals' motivation to learn is affected by the rewards from the learning community and the extent to which a student participates in knowledge construction (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). That is to say, knowledge is created through

supportive social interactions which facilitate active participation of all members in the community (Kim, 2001; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010).

This suggests that, educational institutions are learning communities with learners and instructors who construct reality or knowledge through social and pedagogical interactions. Learners are supposed to engage actively in social and pedagogical activities of the “*learning community*” and take part in knowledge construction. The instructor as an expert has the role to facilitate interaction, encourage, motivate, and guide learners to take part in knowledge creation in a collaborative way (Atherton, 2013; Dagarin, 2005).

3. Statement of the Problem

Limited interaction can lead to loneliness, disengagement, depression, anxiety and dissatisfaction among students (Choo & Singh, 2013; Lacina, 2002; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). Since learning motivation is influenced by rewards from the learning community (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002), distress affects learning motivation and retention (Grahame, 2008; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). This proposes that, knowledge on international students' interactional processes in different countries with different social-cultural and linguistic environment is crucial when designing proper social and academic support for international students. Most of the retrieved studies reported on international students interactional processes in the US, England, Australia, and other western countries with little focus on China, which suggests that little is known about international students in Chinese social-cultural and linguistic environment. With this purpose, this study aimed at describing international students' interactional processes in relation to their learning experiences in Northern China.

Specifically this study sought to investigate:

- Ways of interaction among international students themselves, and between them and their instructors.
- International students' perceptions on the influence of their interaction experiences to their learning experiences.
- The influence of their perceptions of interaction on the way they interact at the university.

3.1 Significance of the Study

Internationalization in higher education is becoming part of Chinese higher education as what happens in other universities worldwide (Jokila, 2015; Wang, & Li, 2016; Zhu, & Ma, 2011). In this regard, information about international students on their interactional processes and learning experiences is required in order to design and implement programmes that provide appropriate social and academic support (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). Since the literature does not say much on international students' interaction experiences in China, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on that. It also creates awareness to both students and instructors on their interactional roles as active members of the learning community for meaningful learning. Generally,

the information is essential on how to improve interaction among international students themselves and between them and their instructors to reduce loneliness and dissatisfaction, which negatively affect the motivation to learn.

4. Methods

This was a qualitative case study, which intended to find out international students' interactional processes in relation to their learning experiences at one university in Northern China. The case study was considered useful in studying the importance and meaning of interaction from the international students' perspective looking at processes and the relationships with learning (Denscombe, 2007). This case study used semi structured interviews and observation to collect data from five participants. Guiding questions focused on participants' experiences on interactions; their perceptions of those experiences concerning their learning; and the influence of their perceptions on the way they interacted with fellow students as well as instructors.

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed into text format. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data in this case study. As Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest that, theme identification involves some procedures and techniques. With this regard, researchers familiarised with data through re-reading the text while noting important phrases or items of interest in relation to the research questions of the study. Then, the coding and establishing patterns of related information were done by looking on the recurrent information or words that frequently occurred. Also these patterns of information were compared across participants to establish similarities and differences (if any), before these patterns were grouped into categories and being labelled.

Furthermore, to double check the consistency and validity of the findings, the transcripts were sent to respondents who read and confirmed that the content represents their ideas. In addition to that, as Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008) suggest, the transcribed text and the developed themes were reviewed by an experienced qualitative researcher with the same purpose to double check consistency and validity.

After the interview which was the main data collection method, three observations were done during the research seminars as one of the learning activities to provide some insights on how students interacted and participated in seminar group discussions. Since observations were done after the interviews, there was some information that needed confirmation from respondents who participated in the main interview sessions, thus two of them were interviewed briefly for about 10 minutes. The focus was to get their insight on the role of peer interaction particularly in the seminar context on their learning achievement.

4.1 Population, Sampling Procedures and Sample

This case study was conducted at one university in Northern China (Jilin Province). Population of the study was Master's degree international students at the School of Education. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to draw five participants out of

about 15 Master's international students at the School of Education. In purposeful sampling, the selection of the units is based on the prior identified criteria for inclusion (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009 p. 343). With regard to this case study, criteria used to select participants were second year of study, and those in the English instruction programme. Language of instruction was considered as one of the criteria so as to avoid language barriers between interviewers and respondents, and the second year of study was considered in order to get participants who had experience both in classroom activities, and had already started the research process for their master's dissertation.

Participants' educational backgrounds varied in terms of their majors, but all of them had pursued a bachelor's degree related to education except one whose bachelor degree was in ICT. All the participants had been in China for almost two years and were studying to acquire Master degrees in education majoring in different fields like higher education; curriculum and pedagogy; applied psychology; and educational management. Among these participants, three were females and two were males with ages varying from 26 to 33. In terms of continent affiliation, two were from Africa, one from Europe, and the remaining two from Asia.

4.2 Context Description for both Interview and Observation

All interviews were individually conducted in respondents' rooms. Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and then the analysis of the emerging themes was done in relation to the objectives of the study. Observations were done once per week in a weekly seminar for three weeks consecutively. Immediately, after the last observation session, the two participants who participated in the initial interview sessions were briefly interviewed for about ten minutes, to gain more insight on the role of peer interaction on their learning. Generally, the focus of the observation was to ascertain students' participation and interaction on the seminar that was conducted once in a week.

Main participants in the seminars were international Master's and PhD students from the School of Education (with few Chinese students). However, participation and attendance was not limited to those Master's and PhD students only, as invitation was always extended to all students who might want to participate. Themes that were presented varied but were mostly related to language and culture, education issues and practices; as well as research methodology. Language of presentation and discussion was English.

Each weekly seminar lasted for 1 hour 30 minutes of which there were two presentations. Time was allocated for each presentation was 20 minutes, followed by a discussion phase of 10 minutes; however this was not fixed as sometimes presenters used more than 20 minutes and the discussions were also extended for more than 10 minutes. Seminar sessions started with a brief presentation of the presenters' biography by the chairperson of the session, and then the presenters were welcomed in turns to talk about their topic.

5. Findings

The following major themes emerged out of interview data.

5.1 Interaction processes with supervisors and other instructors

Interaction of the students with their supervisors as well as other instructors was grouped together under the umbrella of students-instructors' interaction. It was revealed that students interacted with their instructors through different means like email, text message, chat engines (i.e WeChat) as well as face-to-face depending on the purpose of such interactions. Mainly email was used to submit assignments or research progress; while text messages were used to request face-to-face meeting appointments, to remind instructors about feedback, or to confirm their submissions.

All respondents verified that, face to face interactions with other instructors other than their supervisors, was limited to classroom activities for the first year of their study, and after that, they rarely interacted with them. However, the interaction between students and the two instructors who were programme coordinators was active up to the time of this study. This was vivid during observation, as one of the coordinators was always there to guide students in the seminar activities and discussions. Participants agreed to have engaged in in face-to-face interactions with their supervisors, which normally lasted for 30 minutes to one hour discussing their research progress. Nevertheless, one of the respondents was not satisfied with the limited interaction he had with his supervisor as he said:

"...actually I have limited face to face interaction with my supervisor...normally it's like 5 to 10 minutes which to me is not enough and I am not satisfied..."(Michael)

In addition to that, the issue of feedback, frequency of interaction and the role of students in initiating interaction with their instructors came up. All respondents confirmed that, mostly they were the ones to initiate interactions with their supervisor or instructors. In addition, they also commented on the issue of frequencies of interactions as being once or twice per month, or once per week depending on the supervisor's convenience. Respondents did not have a problem with frequencies of interaction or them being initiators of interactions, as they believed that their instructors were very busy with many tasks to accomplish, and so they felt that it was their responsibility to contact their supervisors once they had problems.

However, respondents were not satisfied with some instructors who gave them only grades for their term papers without detailed comments on what was supposed to be improved. In addition to that, the issue of delays of feedback from supervisors was raised by three participants, while two respondents confirmed that they always got timely feedback. One of the respondents who were not satisfied with feedback delays said:

"...I sent my work to him earlier than the announced date from the coordinator, I waited for one week without any response, I went to his office I asked him and he said that he was busy maybe towards the end of that week he would reply, but that week passed, and

third also passed...almost one month now... and I was supposed to submit loose bind draft the following week and I did not have comments from my supervisor...maybe some people might say, why didn't you remind him, but how many times should I remind him..."(Michael).

5.2 Interaction with Instructors Compared to Previous Educational Experiences

Another theme was on how respondents' interacted with their instructors in their previous educational practices and engagements. All respondents agreed that instructors at their previous educational levels were also busy like many university lecturers in their current program. However, two of them pointed out that apart from instructors being busy, instructors were close to students, advising them on academic matters as well as on personal issues.

Two other respondents who were enjoying close relationship with their supervisors confirmed that, they never had close interaction with their instructors apart from classroom interactions. They attributed this experience to the large class size, such that it was not easy for instructors to get closer to the students. Besides, one said that most of her instructors were part-time lecturers with limited time to establish bond with students. The other respondent had a different experience as she confirmed that she was not close to her instructors as a way to show respect, because they were older than she was, she said:

"...one of my supervisors was old and I felt that frequent interactions with him could bother him...I think we have to pay more respect to elderly people..." (Natpa)

5.3 Students' Feelings when Interacting with their Instructors

The interviewer was also curious to know how students felt when interacting with their instructors. It was revealed, respondents believed that their instructors were very busy with many academic and administrative issues to handle and so this affected the way they interacted with students. In addition, three of the respondents confirmed that they were not free with their supervisors; sometimes they were even afraid to ask questions.

They were not close to their supervisors, and their interaction was only limited to academic affairs, such that they could not even seek advice on different social and personal problems they sometimes faced. Below are their verbatim reports:

"...how many times should I remind him? So sometimes, I guess I need to be careful, maybe he will get angry..." (Michael)

"...I interact with him on academic issues only, but for social ...no. He is strict and rarely talks to us and when I meet him his facial expression looks tense so I am bit scared and find it difficult to talk to him..."(Aiko)

"...I feel like not to meet him...I don't know...I think, I don't want to bother him....because I know he is always busy..."(Natpa)

However, on the other hand two respondents were very happy and comfortable with their supervisors even though they acknowledged that they were busy too. Below is what they said:

"...I am very comfortable with my supervisor because she is friendly and does not get tired of listening... we have good communication, even though she is busy...and I am free to tell her even my personal issues..." (Rose)

"...she is like a mother to me and I feel free to talk with her... I can talk to her about my personal issues about my family, my interests..." (Lea)

5.4 Interactions with Classmates/fellow International Students

This study found that for academic purposes participants interacted more with classmates and senior students in related majors than those from other faculties. Academic interaction with other international students from other faculties was limited to Mandarin language classes. Respondents ascertained that social interaction with other international students was active through a couple of social activities like picnics, birthday parties, cultural and religious ceremonies. However, international students' interactions with local students were limited to a few Chinese students who confidently were willing to speak English. In addition, one respondent said that she was more comfortable interacting with people from her own culture or closely related to her culture, than those who were very different.

For the other four respondents, issues of culture, religion and gender were not among reasons to limit their interactions with other international students, although language barrier was mentioned as an inhibitor of interaction among international students themselves, and between them and Chinese students. Below is the verbatim quote of one of the respondents:

"...interaction with other international students is sometimes difficult due to language barrier, the languages that connect us here are English and Chinese, some cannot speak English, it is only their local language, and Chinese... my Chinese is very poor so we end up saying hi or smile at each other as a way of greeting..." (Lea)

5.5 Perceptions Regarding Interaction Processes and Their Learning Achievement

All respondents acknowledged the importance of interaction with instructors and fellow students in relation to their learning. Two respondents pointed out that, social and pedagogical interaction had influence on their learning motivation and the way they responded to different learning tasks. The following are their words regarding this:

"...when we feel good, not only with study but with people around us and the living conditions, it boosts our motivation to study effectively..." (Aiko)

"...attachment with Prof has something to do with my motivation like I feel more encouraged to work harder for particular subject (of friendly professor) than those with less attachment...I can even say ...aah for this (referring to course whose instructor is not friendly). I will do later..."(Natpa)

However, two of the respondents believed that, it is not good for graduate students to depend much on other students, instead everyone be independent and active in solving academic problems. The feelings were that even fellow students might not be knowledgeable in that particular area, they said the following words:

"...Yes for academic issues...I interact with them (classmates) although I don't prefer them much, because I assume that we are all at the same level, something that I don't know I feel like my classmates do not know too... so I ask seniors because I believe they know more than me..."(Rose)

"...In some way, we as graduate students can solve problems on our own and not to depend much on others as they might not be knowledgeable too, I rarely ask for assistance.... For example I had problems with SPSS application...what I learned in class I felt like could not apply to my work, so I had to find more information online... and solve my problem..." (Natpa)

However, despite less attachment to some instructors, all respondents confirmed that instructors had great influence on their academic development especially on how to design a study, write a research report and other academic issues. Similarly, regardless of the feelings about the expertise of fellow students, participants acknowledged the role of interaction with fellow students on getting more clarification and elaboration on issues that were not clear during class sessions or seminar presentations. It was revealed that, respondents regarded instructors or supervisors' opinion as the last and superior to all comments from other people. As a result, one participant who felt that he had limited interaction with his supervisor was not confident about the quality of his academic work, as he said:

"...if I had better supervision I could achieve a lot of things and even do better work, because when you are moving alone you might be going in the wrong direction without knowing. My supervisor is knowledgeable and might help, but...I am really sad to say that I am working on my own, it is not that I am lying or hiding something, that is the truth...I am working on my own ...it is actually a problem for me but I don't have a choice..."(Michael)

5.6 The Influence of their Perception on the way they interacted with their Instructors/ other Students

As mentioned earlier, it was discovered that all respondents believed that their instructors or supervisors were very busy which affected the way they interacted with

students. Respondents therefore felt it was not right for them to remind their instructors about feedback, as this could mean disturbing them and being disrespectful. Although participants felt that timely feedback was the key to the improvement of learning.

In addition to this, as pointed out earlier, students believed that their instructors were knowledgeable and instructors' opinion was taken as most important and reliable. Regarding this, one of the respondents who had limited interaction with his supervisor was worried about the quality of his work because he only had comments from fellow students and not from his supervisor.

5.7 Findings from Observation

The focus was to ascertain how students participated and interacted during the seminar. One of the most interesting observations was that, leadership and authority was distributed equally among students. All participants took leadership roles in turn regardless of gender, age, major, or level of study. These roles include being chairpersons, timekeepers, and other related roles.

In addition to this, the participants who were interviewed shortly after the last observation session demonstrated positive feelings about the contribution of the seminar on their learning achievement. They mentioned that the seminar helped them to develop presentation skills, research methodology knowledge, and different understandings of culture and other educational issues.

Moreover, the observed climate for discussion was fair and every participant was free to participate by asking questions, requesting clarification or giving comments, however a few students dominated discussion sessions. Although it was not possible within one hour and 30 minutes for all 20 participants to say something, at least the researcher expected to hear different opinions from different students within those three weeks of observations.

6. Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the major findings of the study with regard to the emerged main themes which relate to the research objectives. It was revealed that, international students interacted more with their instructors during the first year of their programme when they had classroom activities. For the second year of study, students had more interaction with respective supervisors and the two coordinators of the English programme at the school of education. Means of interactions were emails, chat engines (e.g. Wechat), phone calls, and text messages, along with face-to-face interaction. The frequency of interactions varied depending on the convenience of the instructors like twice or once per month. Mostly, students were the ones to initiate such interaction.

Findings show that students were comfortable with the interaction processes with their instructors since they held a belief that their instructors were busy. However, they showed concerns about getting timely individualized feedback of different academic assignments, term papers, and research progress for their academic

improvement. It has been established that, when teachers give only grades to students without detailed information on areas to be improved, they are limiting learners' ability to improve their learning (Askham, 1997). This suggests that, since feedback is the best learning tool, should always provide individualized quality feedback with specific strengths and weaknesses of individual students for improving learning.

This study also found that, for academic purposes participants interacted more with classmates and senior students in related majors than those from other faculties. They ascertained that interaction with other international students was active through a couple of social activities which gave them a chance to learn different ways of doing things in different nations. As Gomez, Urzua, and Glass (2014) reported, students' participation in social events contributes to cultural intelligence, and social adjustment. This suggests that social events create a sense of belonging and reduce loneliness for international students, therefore institutions should organise frequent social activities that will bring international students together and give them the opportunity to socialize with fellow students and feel more connected to each other.

Furthermore, it was revealed that previous experiences and culture had influence on the way respondents perceived and interacted with their instructors. From the social constructivism point of view, cultural background and experiences have great influences on the way we perceive the world around us. A similar situation was also shared by Arkoudis and Baik, (2014); Hee and Woodrow, (2008); who found out that, cultural backgrounds influence the way international students interact with their instructors. In some societies, to keep an interaction gap between older and younger populations is a way to show respect, while for others being closer irrespective of age differences implies that someone really cares. For example, in this study, to some respondents age had nothing to do with interaction and respect, while to others it really mattered in the way they interacted.

Moreover, cultural issues were also vivid in terms of how one respondent interacted with fellow students, preferring people from one's culture or closely related cultures, than those who were very different. Similar instances were discussed by Chege, (2013); Brown, (2009); Leong (2015), and Yan and Berliner (2011); that international students in countries like the US, UK and England, were more comfortable interacting with people from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, this might not be effective to accelerate social and cultural adjustments as reported by Gebhard (2012) that international students in US universities who withdrew interaction from American community, delayed to adjust to the new environment and faced challenges related to social, academics, and emotions. Thus it is worthy for instructors to ask students introduce themselves beyond just mentioning their names. Not only that, students can present some basic information about their countries which explains culture, education systems, and the like, to create an environment for cultural awareness.

Since interaction with only people from one's culture delays social and cultural adjustment, international students need to extend their interaction to others. Knowledge on communicative and cultural tolerance is the key to understand and

accept the individuality of another (Navikova & Navikov, 2015). This minimizes misunderstanding, increases students' active participation in different social activities, and allows collective knowledge creation cum sharing, which are very crucial for effective intercultural adaptation (Navikova & Navikov, 2015). Even though international students come from different cultural backgrounds, still they can harmoniously live together and learn from each other without a judgement of who is right/ wrong or who is superior.

Furthermore, participants revealed that they had misunderstanding with classmates at some time due to cultural differences. Leong (2015) reported the same happened to international students in the US universities. These kinds of misunderstandings can be attributed to what Sandhu (1994) called intrapersonal stress created within the self and interpersonal stress created by relationships with other people which all together create a sense of uncertainty, inferiority, communication problems as well as cultural shock. The more they interacted they resolved the conflict. Social constructivism refers conflict resolution stage as the inter-subjectivity of social meaning whereby participants with different understanding of phenomena arrive at a shared and agreed understanding (Kim, 2001).

In addition, it was revealed that, the value or meaning attached to student-instructor interaction is highly related to academic and intellectual growth than student-student interaction, which was viewed as a way for seeking elaboration. This confirms what was established earlier by Endo and Harpel (1982) that, interaction between students and their instructors is very useful for intellectual growth, while peer interaction is useful for personal and social wellbeing. Similar situation was also reported by Andrade (2006) that peer and faculty assistance were very valuable to international students in the US. Social constructivism explains this better as it emphasizes that, learning is a social activity by which individuals actively construct knowledge with the help of other knowledgeable members in a learning community (Kim, 2001). The implication is that, even though student-student interaction is important, it is not enough for effective students learning. Thus, instructors' role to guide students in learning cannot be ignored.

An interesting finding was how gender influenced interaction in terms of how men and women interact with people around them. Even though it was established by Grant, Stronge, and Xu (2013), that Chinese lecturers have more personal and family-like relationship with their students, this study revealed that female instructors had more family-like relationship with students than male instructors. This can be explained by what was reported by Forsyth (2009) that men and women differ in the way they interact, as women are more social and friendly than men. Certainly, both groups of supervisors (men and women) have the same concern and care about their students even though their interaction processes portray different meanings to their students. However, this still needs further study to draw a concrete conclusion on the issue.

As social constructivism emphasize, seminar discussions help students to create knowledge collectively. However, the observed seminar sessions revealed that there was limited student participation as only a few students' dominated discussions.

Reason for the situation can be attributed to English language proficiency as most of the students came from countries where English was not their first language which might have had an implication on their confidence and ability to use English in oral communication environments. A Similar situation was also reported by Andrade (2006), and Lee (1997) as one of challenges of international students in the English-speaking countries. Thus, it is important that instructors encourage students to take part in the academic discussion by introducing a reward in terms of score for anyone who takes part in the discussion.

7. Limitation of the Study and suggestions for further study

This case study used only five participants in one university which suggests that the findings cannot be generalised, although it has depicted some insights on international students' interactions and experiences in China. Thus, future studies might consider recruiting a larger sample and employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to study the same phenomena. In addition, there is a need to hear the other side of instructors' experience and their role in facilitating interaction with their students. Furthermore, this study focuses on the interactions between students and instructors, it is important that future studies should strive to investigate on the interaction processes between international students' and administrators, since the administrators' vision and mission may also be an influencing factor in the students learning experiences. Lastly, future researchers should design studies to explain gender differences in the way instructors interact with their students.

8. Conclusions

This case study report presents international students' interactional processes in relation to their learning experiences at one university in Northern China. It was revealed that students interact with their instructors mostly for academic purposes with some incidents of social matters, while with fellow international students the interaction was more on social with few academic encounters. However, interaction with Chinese students was very limited to a few who could speak English language. Despite some language barriers and cultural challenges in the interaction processes at the institution, respondents attached intellectual and academic benefits to their interaction with instructors, and social wellbeing to their interaction with fellow students. The major students' demands in terms of interaction would be timely and detailed learning feedback from instructors/supervisors.

These findings lead to the following conclusions: First, cultural knowledge is important to both students and instructors to interact with people from different social cultural background with fewer misunderstandings. Not only that but also students active participation in different social and academic activities regardless of their cultural background are encouraged to master language used in the particular activities (in this situation English and Chinese), and to understand different cultures. Moreover,

instructors are reminded that timely and detailed feedback on students learning progress is a learning motivation to students. Lastly, the role of instructors as a knowledgeable expert is to facilitate interactions, to encourage, to motivate, and to build confidence in students in the learning process. Since interaction is important for acculturation and learning motivation, institutions need to have solid arrangements to facilitate the process to build positive, supportive social and psychological environment for learning. As one of the respondents said "...when we feel good, not only with studies but also with people around us and the living conditions, it boosts our motivation to study effectively..."

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