

Evaluation of the Short-term International Language and Culture Exchange Program: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract. *The purposes of this study were to evaluate the short-term international language and culture exchange program for a month between Dali University, China and Burapha University, Thailand, and to provide recommendations for improving the program. Using a naturalistic approach, the setting involved purposive sampling that was used to identify 18 participants who had participated in the program. The experiences of Chinese students who joined the program were investigated using an in-depth semi-structured interview. The data were then classified into ten interrelated themes: (1) Life experience, (2) Learning experience, (3) Impression, (4) English communication, (5) Culture, (6) Problems, (7) Suggestion, (8) Reasons to join the program, (9) Benefits, and (10) Comparison. The results of this study showed the strengths and weaknesses of the present program. The program contributed substantively to the participants' individual development and international understanding. The findings also discussed the Chinese students' experiences of English communicative proficiency. The study recommended the need for increased accountability and commitment of those concerned at every level in each university and to pay more attention to the continuity and sustainability of the program.*

Keywords: Program Evaluation, Exchange Program, English Language, Naturalistic Approach

Introduction

With the growth of globalization and the internationalization of higher education, international exchange and cooperation have played a critical role between the two different institutions, Dali University in China and Burapha University in Thailand. Dali University's motto is 'Converging Cultures to Shape the Spirit of the University'. It has developed international exchange and cooperation with Burapha University in Thailand for the past 3 years. The two universities have made great progress regarding international education. A one-month international exchange program on language and culture from July to August in summer holiday has been in place since 2007 between Dali University and Burapha University. The program focuses on the role of education in promoting global and cross-cultural knowledge and understanding. The two universities are committed to making efforts to sustain and improve the program.

The 21st century is the century of development for China. Science, technology, economics,

and education developments have stimulated the change in the cultivation model of higher education. In the higher education field, international exchange and cooperation have become commonplace to observe that global awareness must be an important educational goal if our students are to cope successfully as citizens and professionals with the challenges of globalization (Skidmore, Marston & Olson, 2007).

Internationalization is the developmental trend in higher education. Conforming to this trend, Dali University has seized opportunities to implement the 'going out' strategy and actively promotes international exchanges and cooperation programs. The university takes its own advantages in the light of local conditions, stressing its educational strengths, focusing on mutual benefits and progressively promotes international cooperation (Li, Shi & Liu, 2008). Dali University has been strengthening its exchange and cooperation programs with South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. The University has joint or exchange programs with many universities and higher institutions in these

countries. It could be seen that it was necessary to promote the international exchanges in the field of higher education between China and Thailand. The year 2009 was the 34th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relationship between China and Thailand. It was very important and necessary to study the ways of higher educational exchanges, to plan for the further exchange in the 21st century, to work out the details of certain specific projects, and to promote and develop higher education links between China and Thailand (Yi, 2000).

Dali University has developed long-term and traditional cooperative links with Burapha University of Thailand. The two universities have made great progress regarding international cooperation, such as cooperative education and research, academic and cultural exchanges, teacher-student exchange, Chinese promotion, enrolment of undergraduate and graduate students, discussions of curriculum, and participating in Chinese-foreign cooperative projects and Presidents' Forums (Li, Shi & Liu, 2008). Among these initiatives, the international short-term student exchange program appeared especially outstanding. The program responded to both external and internal pressures. Externally, Dali University and Burapha University, both public universities were committed to international education. Such commitment was evident in the growing number of students participating in academic experiences abroad. Internally, the two universities were facing growing interest on the part of students who wished to incorporate an international dimension into their college experience. Similarly, both universities faculty members were supportive of advancing international opportunities. With the creation of the international exchange program, they were moving towards meeting the need for becoming globally and internationally-focused universities. Previous research had found that international student exchange programs contributed substantively to the participants' individual development and international understanding (Sowa, 2002).

Purposes

The two purposes of this research study were:

1. To evaluate the short-term international language and culture exchange program between Dali University and Burapha University; and

2. To provide the recommendations for improving the short-term international language and culture exchange program between Dali University and Burapha University.

Research Questions

The research questions that were the focus of this study were:

Main Question: What are the experiences of Chinese students who joined the short-term international language and culture exchange program?

Sub-Questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program between Dali University and Burapha University?
2. What are the Chinese students' experiences of English communicative proficiency? and
3. What improvements could be made by both Dali University and Burapha University?

Literature Review

The term 'evaluation' refers to the activity of systematically collecting, analyzing and reporting information that can then be used to change attitudes or to improve the operation of a project or program. The word 'systematic' stipulates that the evaluation must be planned (Douglass, 1998). As defined by the American Evaluation Association (2006, p.1), "evaluation involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, personnel, products, and organizations to improve their effectiveness. Evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of data needed to make decisions, a process in which most well-run programs engage from the outset". There are many definitions of evaluation; however, there is no single correct way to evaluate that is best suited for all situations. It is likely that a particular evaluation approach using certain methods and techniques will provide better answers to specific questions than some other approaches.

There are several evaluation models available to the social researcher. Karnjarawasee (2004) reviewed 28 evaluation models in his book called 'Evaluation Theory'. He explained that in each model there were some similar and different methods and techniques. It should be noted here that the researcher in this study intended to review the lit-



erature related to evaluation issue in order to have the sensitivity about what he was going to hear from the participants. The researcher did not intend to use the concepts or the literature reviewed to frame his mind or ideas during the data collection period. Certain models of evaluation research are more consonant with qualitative methods than others. Among recent efforts, House (1978) has developed perhaps the most comprehensive taxonomy of major evaluation models. He identifies eight separate models distinguishable by the audiences they address, what they assume consensus on, the outcomes they examine, the typical questions they ask, and the methods they employ. The eight modes are: 1) systems analysis, 2) behavioral objectives, 3) decision-making, 4) goal-free, 5) art criticism, 6) accreditation, 7) adversary, and 8) transaction. Five of the eight models identified by House (1978) have been judged to be largely incompatible with a comprehensive qualitative methods strategy; however, at least three of the models (accreditation, connoisseurship, and adversary) are amenable to the use of descriptive data, thought not to pure forms of naturalistic inquiry and holistic-inductive analysis. The remaining three evaluation models—the transaction model, goal-free evaluation, and the decision-making model—are highly compatible with a comprehensive qualitative methods strategy (Patton, 1990).

If evaluation research is truly to become a paradigm of choices, then evaluators must understand the options available in matching research methods to evaluation questions. The challenge is to select those methods most appropriate to particular decision maker concerns and specific evaluation situations (Patton, 1990). The researcher presents two different approaches in this study, the CIPP model which is a systematic decision-oriented (SD) model and the Constructivist Approach which is a naturalistic value-oriented (NV) model, before choosing the latter.

The CIPP model of evaluation was developed by Daniel Stufflebeam and his colleagues in the 1960s, out of their experience of evaluating education projects for the Ohio Public Schools District. CIPP is an acronym for Context, Input, Process and Product. This evaluation model requires the evaluation of context, input, process and product in judging a program's value (Robinson, 2002).

Critics of CIPP have argued that it holds an

idealized notion of what the process should be rather than its actuality, and that is too top-down or managerial in approach, depending on an ideal of rational management perspective, rather than recognizing its messy reality. In practice, the informative relationship between evaluation and decision-making has proved difficult to achieve and does not take into account sufficiently the politics of decision-making within and between organizations (Robinson, 2002).

Designing a naturalistic study means something very different from the traditional notion of 'design', which as often as not meant the specification of a statistical design with its attendant field conditions and controls. Most of the requirements normally laid down for a design statement cannot be met by naturalists, because the naturalistic inquiry is largely emergent. But while it may be impossible to provide specifics, it is clear that there are certain questions the naturalist must bear in mind and address, at least provisionally, from the earliest stages of conception and planning: specifying a focus; determining the degree of fit between the focus as stated and inquiry paradigms that can be brought to bear on it; determining the fit between the selected inquiry paradigm and the substantive theory that will be employed; determining where and from whom data will be collected; determining the nature and scope of successive project phases (i.e., orientation and overview, focused exploration, and member check and closure); determining instrumentation; determining data analysis procedures; planning logistics for the project as a whole, prior to an actual field excursion, during a field excursion, as follow-up to a field excursion, and for closure and termination; and planning for trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The importance of international student exchange programs was accentuated by Keteflan and Redman (1997), who stated that students often lacked an international view on research and research findings, in spite of the availability of international literature. The program can enable the students to develop sensitivity to global issues and it would facilitate the students' personal growth, and one of the benefits for the students, is a lived experience within a culture different from their own (Johannes & Eileen, 2009). International student exchange programs also contributed substantively to participants' individual development



and international understanding (Sowa, 2002).

An exchange program is the most important form of internationalization, after teaching, for students. Most universities organize student exchange programs with partnering universities abroad. The experience of living in a culture that differs dramatically from one's own culture is in itself an educational experience. Other programs that will enhance student awareness of global issues include multicultural awareness and foreign language training. In an increasingly interdependent world, especially when large companies operate in many countries, students need to understand cultures other than their own and accept the differences in other nations (Ravenscroft & Clark, 1991).

Research Design

The study explored the experiences of Chinese students who had joined the international language and culture exchange program between Dali University and Burapha University from 2007 to 2009. The study aimed to help promote and develop the international student language and culture exchange program, and to assist the two universities to meet the need of becoming global and internationally-focused universities. Therefore, the present study employed a descriptive qualitative research approach for three reasons:

First, in qualitative research, there is a belief that there are multiple realities that may only be studied holistically (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Realities cannot be understood in isolation from their context. Qualitative researchers look to understand the perceptions, feelings, experiences, and opinions of people through in-depth intensive interviewing (Patton, 2002). In this study, data from interviews and document analysis enabled the researcher to fully understand the human experience of the par-

ticipants.

Second, qualitative methods are suggested when very little is known about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative design is considered as a helpful starting point. According to the author's review of literature of this field, there is no study of students' experience in joining such a short-term international language and culture exchange program. Very little information is known about students' experiences in this field. Their experiences are needed to provide more specific evidence for developing the program sustainably.

Third, qualitative inquiry uses humans as the primary data-gathering instrument, because of the belief that generating a standardized instrument that is adaptable to multiple realities is unlikely (Patton, 2002). Humans are adaptable to the patterns that may be encountered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher focused on describing the experiences of Chinese students who joined the program, which included their attitudes, opinions, values, beliefs, and feelings of being in Thailand.

Research Methods

The sample of the study was focused on the Chinese students from Dali University, who had participated in the short-term international language and culture exchange program at Burapha University, Thailand from 2007 to 2009. Participants chosen purposively were invited to participate in an in-depth interview. Eighteen participants from different faculties and majors were chosen to be involved in the study. As qualitative research is intended to take place in the natural setting, the investigator conducted the interviews in a setting of convenience for the participants. The classification of the participants is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. The Classification of the Participants

Participant No.	Gender	Academic Year	Faculty	Major	Interview Place
P1	male	4	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P2	female	2	Education	Psychology	Dali University
P3	female	3	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P4	male	3	Sports Science	Social Sports	Dali University



Participant No.	Gender	Academic Year	Faculty	Major	Interview Place
P5	male	3	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P6	female	3	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P7	female	3	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P8	female	2	Fine Arts	Music	Dali University
P9	male	3	Sport Science	Social Sports	Dali University
P10	male	3	Sport Science	Sports Education	Dali University
P11	female	3	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P12	male	3	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P13	female	3	Education	Pre-school Education	Dali University
P14	male	2	Education	Primary School Education	Dali University
P15	female	2	Education	Pre-school education	Dali University
P16	female	4	Sport Science	Sports Education	Dali University
P17	female	3	Economy & Management	Tourism Management	Burapha University
P18	female	3	Nursing	Nursing	Burapha University

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher generated the interview questions by following the interview guide of Patton (2002). The 60-90 minute, semi-structured, tape-recorded interview was conducted using open-ended questions included in the interview guide. An in-depth interview, based on a series of 15 questions developed in an interview guide was used in the interviews, as well as additional questions on topics raised by the participants in the interviews, was the data collection instrument of this study.

For data analysis, the investigator referred to the data from interviewing the participants about their self-perceptions of their participation in the international student language and culture exchange program between Dali University, China and Burapha University, Thailand. Data analysis began right away after data collection in order to facilitate later data collection phases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the data were read, reread, and then coded. Coding organized the raw data into meaningful categories. As coding pro-

ceeded, the investigator was able to reorganize the data into more precise categories. The initial list of codes was revised and new codes were generated. The final list of codes was used to code all the data.

Findings and Discussion

The findings were initially open coded and then developed as categories. The final list of 10 coding categories of meaning which emerged from interviews were as follows: (1) Life experience, (2) Learning experience, (3) Impression, (4) English communication, (5) Culture, (6) Problems, (7) Suggestion, (8) Reasons to join the program, (9) Benefits, and (10) Comparison.

Response to the Research Questions:

“What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program between Dali University and Burapha University?” In responding to this research question, five categories of findings related to the question

will be integrated: life experience issue, learning experience issue, impression issue, benefit issue and problem issue. It is obvious that the program provided participants with an exceptional educational opportunity, as well as the opportunity to develop a unique perspective of the world. In other words, the international student exchange program contributed substantively to participants' individual development and international understanding (Sowa, 2002). Nevertheless, there still were some problems that were highlighted in the course of implementing the program. These problems will be discussed later in this section.

“What are the Chinese students' experiences of English communicative proficiency?”

In responding to this research question, two categories of findings emerged: English communication issues and culture issues were integrated to answer this research question. Generally speaking, the participants realized the great importance of English after they joined the international language and culture exchange program. In terms of the improvement of English, the participants expressed their positive and negative attitudes about the conditions of the language environment. Being affected by the factors of intercultural communication barriers and cultural shock, the participants interacted with people from different languages and cultures. They also gained an increased awareness of differing cultural values. These experiences facilitated greater tolerance of others and an understanding of how challenging life might be for members of minority ethnic groups. This insight was gained from the participants' temporary experiences as a minority group facing the challenges of language and cultural understanding (Green, 2008).

“What improvements could be made from both Dali University and Burapha University?” In responding to this research question, the participants focused on the suggestion issue and comparison issue to answer this research question. The suggestions of participants could be summarized by four interrelated themes which are to enhance the general administration of the program, to set up a complete selection and evaluation system, to provide enough economic support, and to extend the length of the exchange. With regard to the comparison issue, the participants found that a big gap existed between the two universities, such as learning environment, teaching facilities and equipments,

teaching systems, administrative levels and so on. Therefore, the participants suggested overall that Dali University should try to reduce the gap between the two universities to sustain the program in the long-term.

Trustworthiness

Three dimensions of trustworthiness were applied in this study: 1) **Audit trail**. Based on the previous perspectives, the researcher in this study kept a personal log and audit trail to ensure the credibility of the study. It included relevant data and information from the start of the preparation of the research proposal. Items were revised and updated until the end of the research project; 2) **Triangulation**. The technique of comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and in different places within this research was applied. This has been done through comparing the perspectives of participants in different interview places. The interviews were conducted at both the campus of Dali University, China and at Burapha University, Thailand, in such places as available offices and classrooms, in a pavilion located in a campus, park and in a café off-campus; 3) **Authenticity**. Authenticity checks conducted in this study included: obtaining informed consent from all participants, accuracy checks, and additional interviews with some certain participants. Informed consent from all participants was obtained from each of them before the interview process began, according to the ethical conditions approved by both universities, and the consent forms signed by all the participants were put in the audit trail of the study. An accuracy check for transcription and translation was conducted by way of reviewing, editing, revising, adjusting and discussing during the whole process of analysis and management.

Ethical Considerations

An in-depth interview was used for collecting data in this study. The researcher protected the privacy of each participant and confidentiality of data to the maximum extent possible, and communicated how this was done in the consent statement. To ensure the confidentiality of information collected during an evaluation study. Using code numbers rather than names, collecting only necessary information, reporting group rather than individual

results, and securing research materials are ways to maintain confidentiality (John, Werner, Randy & Simone, 2006).

Informed consent is an important way to respect individual difference. Creswell (2003) suggested that the researcher should ask the participants to sign an informed consent form before they engaged in the study and gave each participant an opportunity to ask questions.

Implications

This section presents the implications for practice drawn from the findings of the present study. The implications are divided into those for both universities and for those concerned with the program.

Implication for both universities

Both universities have been developing the short-term international student language and culture exchange program for three years. With the creation of this international cooperation and exchange program, they are moving towards meeting the need for becoming globally and internationally-focused universities. Based on the findings from the present study, the researcher began with a brief reminder about the strengths and limitations of data from the program. At first, it was found that the program enhanced the participants in their individual development and cultural awareness, while increasing their initiative of global understanding. Nevertheless, some limitations occurred in the course of the implementing the program. In view of the existing situation, it is quite necessary for the two universities to strengthen closer cooperation and exchange, and more importantly, to enhance the weaknesses in order to maintain the sustainable development of the program in the future.

Implication for those concerned

In order for a program to be fully effective and sustainable, the process of choosing and implementing should include the students involved in the program. Dufour and Eaker (1998) supported this notion when they indicated that changes often fail because of the lack of strong leadership and decisions are made from the top down. Furthermore, Huffman and Hipp (2003) noted that in order for

change to be effective, school administrators must participate democratically with teachers by sharing power, authority, and decision making and by promoting and nurturing leadership among staff. Findings from the present study indicated the need for increased accountabilities of the presidents, instructors, staff and coordinators of the faculties. With the changing development of the program, diverse individuals and personnel are involved or will be involved in the program every year. Whoever has related experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities are required to become involved in the joint effort of the selection, development, and planning. All those concerned at every level should pay attention to commit themselves to the continuity and sustainability of the program.

Recommendations

First, this research was conducted by collecting data from a convenience sample of eighteen Chinese participants in Dali University, China. Another in-depth case study conducted with Thai participants in Burapha University, Thailand might enhance the overall evaluation of the international exchange program between the two institutions by providing balance from the Thai perspective.

Second, even though the participants experienced and acknowledged considerable support from both their home and host universities, there were instances where was insufficient planning to meet the needs of some of the participating students.

Third, the shared responsibility with partner institutions to ensure that the international language and culture exchange program was well planned and the participants were adequately prepared was not always realized. A well-planned program increases the readiness of the responsible parties in launching a new program and will enhance the level of success of the project. It is worth spending time on careful planning rather than launching an international exchange program prematurely (Sakulkoo, Tubsee & Nonthasak, 2008). There is therefore, a need for change in the preparation, support and monitoring of both Thai and Chinese students, greater engagement with institutions involved in international student mobility and more effective mentoring of staff.

Fourth, the international language and cul-

ture exchange program enabled the participants to develop both personal and professional skills of engaging with unfamiliar cultures, different educational systems, and mastering new challenges,

such as speaking a foreign or second language. Further research is needed in these areas to fully understand how these changes take place.

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