The Enhancing Series Case Studies: International Learning Experience

The Chinese Cultural Experience: A Case Study with Year 3 British Students Travelling to Zhejiang Gongshang University, China

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Introduction

This case study describes the experiences of a group of British students and staff on a visit to a university in China. The study visit reflects on the learning undertaken when teaching English to Chinese students and the cultural experience of studying in China.

Keywords
International students, China, English support, SEPP, international business, Chinese culture, spoken English

Summary

This paper reflects on the lessons learnt and the challenges experienced when a group of British students and staff from the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education (NEWI) in Wrexham embarked on a study visit to a university in China. It outlines the successes and difficulties encountered with the two main activities associated with the visit: learning about Chinese business and also speaking English to Chinese students.

Attitudes and practices within the life of a Chinese university are included in this case study as well as the experiences gained when visiting cultural sights in the cities of Shanghai and Hangzhou. The tensions and challenges of close group activity for two weeks are highlighted and details of the student assessment undertaken on the return to NEWI are also included. It concludes with a review of
lessons learnt and possible practical applications within the UK university context.

**Objectives**

During the first two weeks of November 2006, a group of twenty students and two members of staff from the Business School at NEWI in Wrexham embarked on a study visit to China. The delegation was invited to stay at Zhejiang Gongshang University (ZJGSU) near Hangzhou in eastern China to take part in a programme of activities which were designed to benefit both institutions.

The visit included two elements:

- An educational programme, delivered in English to the NEWI students, on Chinese culture and business.
- A Spoken English Promotion Project (SEPP) which was designed to engage the NEWI students in English conversation with small groups of Chinese students.

The NEWI cohort of students included a number of final year undergraduate business students as well as students from other disciplines. All the students were expected to take part in the educational programme and undertake the assessment.

Students on the final year of the business degree programme were required to study a core module of international business during semester one. The China visit provided some of these students with the opportunity of studying international business at a Chinese university, as an alternative to the course at NEWI. The series of lectures delivered at ZJGSU were negotiated in advance to ensure that the necessary objectives were achievable. The assessment included group presentations and individual reflective comments.

The objective for ZJGSU was designed to provide small groups of Chinese students with an opportunity to engage in English conversation and enhance their vocabulary and knowledge of the English language and culture. The NEWI students were given the role of teaching assistants and it was a requirement that the delegation included enthusiastic, lively and sociable students, in order to maximise the learning experience for the Chinese students (ZJGSU, 2008)

**Rationale**

Universities across the UK have experienced a growth in the numbers of international students during the last few years, and the number of undergraduate applicants from China for 2008 has increased by 20.5%, to 3386 (Attwood, 2008). The development of relationships with Chinese universities is high on the UK agenda for recruitment purposes. Understanding the cultural environment of
Chinese students could be a key factor in appreciating the background of educational practice which Chinese students bring with them to the UK.

The rapid increase in the number of international students at NEWI has provided the tutors with additional challenges and the increase in students, mainly from India and China, has prompted an urgent need to provide a suitable learning experience for multicultural cohorts of students.

The growing diversity of the student cohort has accelerated the need to internationalise business programmes. Webb (2006) cites a number of definitions from literature concerning internationalisation of the curriculum, but all agree that it is more than providing modules with ‘international’ in the title.

This opportunity for the NEWI delegation provided exposure to an educational and cultural engagement within a Chinese context. With the probable increase in international students studying business at NEWI in the near future, it is recognised (Ryan and Carroll, 2005) that gaining experiences abroad will provide tutors with an empathetic understanding of different cultures, and will assist in the enrichment of academic and teaching practices.

International students who study at NEWI are provided with additional support in English and study skills alongside their specialist studies. In common with other universities (Warwick, 2007) the sessions on English for academic purposes have had limited success, with some poor attendance and lack of student motivation. The engagement of the NEWI students in the Spoken English Promotion Project at ZJGSU provided an opportunity to investigate an alternative approach to improving the English levels of Chinese students.

**Context**

NEWI’s mission statement is:

“To provide high quality higher education and research in a welcoming, friendly and supportive environment to meet individual, local, national and international needs.”

In accordance with other UK universities with similar mission statements, universities are increasingly business driven (Ayoubi and Al-Habaibeh, 2006) and international partnerships and collaboration has become a key corporate objective.

The visit was organised by the business school and the NEWI delegation was arranged to include two members of the academic staff, nine business students and eleven other students from study disciplines including English, humanities, sound technology, engineering and art.
There were no student cost implications for the tuition, accommodation, food and local travel expenses in China. This element was covered financially by the students’ participation in the Spoken English Promotion Project. In order to promote the relationship and ensure that the opportunity was available to a cross-section of students, a scholarship arrangement was partially funded by NEWI to pay for the cost of the air fare.

**Description**

**Preparations for the Visit**
Following an application process to join the visit, the students were interviewed and selected, based on their suitability, the criteria being set by ZJGSU.

The organisation of arrangements for the visit was a time consuming task: booking flights, arranging visas, insurance, risk assessment, application forms for ZJGSU, providing detailed fact sheets and declaration forms for students on health, safety and conduct. The students each contributed £120 to the cost of the visit, and although the cost of the flight was paid for by NEWI, additional money was required to cover the cost of the visa as well as weekend excursions. This non-refundable contribution was considered appropriate to ensure commitment from the students.

**Life on Campus**
On arrival the NEWI students and staff met other delegations from the Philippines and Chile who were also staying at ZJGSU. The Chinese hosts showed great pleasure and pride in providing a tour of the campus, and a number of official photographs were taken to celebrate the occasion.

*Delegations from NEWI, Chile and the Philippines posing for photographs*
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The teaching and campus facilities were of a relatively high standard, and were located in a geographical area which contained several other universities outside the city of Hangzhou. The expansion of this university area was apparent, with the construction of a substantial number of impressive university buildings.

The NEWI delegation was allocated shared accommodation on the university campus. The rooms were situated together and during the two weeks of the visit this group environment created its own tensions and camaraderie, which the tutors were challenged to manage.

The students and staff were provided with a ‘spending card’ which was credited with an amount of money which was sufficient to provide living expenses on campus for the two weeks of the visit. Although this credit adequately covered the cost of meals in the student canteen and purchases in the campus shops, both staff and many of the students had difficulty finding food they enjoyed eating. A Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) was located within a twenty minute taxi ride, and take away meals were a welcome purchase on more than one occasion.

Since the NEWI delegation was the only British group of students on campus at that time, the attention aroused was somewhat overwhelming. The relatively tall male NEWI students were an attraction for the female students but also welcome team mates for the male basketball players. British football teams were regarded with interest and formed the basis of many informal discussions between the British and Chinese students.

The student accommodation for the Chinese students was contained within single sex dormitory blocks, where four students shared a room. With a structured learning environment, long days of study started at 7.30 a.m. and continued late into the evening. Although students were allowed some free time during the day, class contact time was greatly in excess of that experienced by UK students. English, traditional mathematics and sport were a compulsory element of the curriculum for all students, irrespective of the major subject studied for their degree. It was common practice for Chinese students to read aloud outside during the daytime in order to practise the pronunciation of their English.

**Study of Chinese Culture and International Business**

The structure of the morning sessions on Chinese culture and international business followed a traditional lecture approach. The lectures were delivered by Chinese lecturers in English to the NEWI students, alongside other students from Chile and the Philippines. Some sessions were devoted to the Chinese language and culture but others were provided in accordance with previous negotiation on various aspects of international business. The assessment on the return to the
UK was based on the lecture sessions and additional information gained from students’ own observation and research on aspects of business with China.

**Spoken English Promotion Project (SEPP)**

The main objective of the visit for ZJGSU was engagement in the Spoken English Promotion Project (SEPP). English was high on the agenda for this university and each member of the NEWI delegation was provided with a schedule to meet groups of four Chinese students in the dormitories of study rooms for four hours each week day. The Chinese students were welcoming and exhibited an enthusiastic attitude to the English sessions. They were eager to learn as much as possible about life in Britain. Although the UK students had previously had no experience of teaching English, the elevation to the status of ‘English teacher’ provided them with a purposeful sense of achievement.

A printed list of conversation topics, photographs and music were used in the sessions and provided the stimulus for an enthusiastic engagement. The success of the sessions was heightened by the curiosity on the part of both sides about every day activities and the common interests of young people. The Chinese students gained confidence in oral English and progress was made in forging relationships.

Some of the sessions took place in the gardens on campus rather than in the dormitories as the weather in this part of China in November was often sunny in the afternoons. These outside venues often attracted the attention of other Chinese students who wanted to contribute to, or observe the sessions.
Cultural Visits and Leisure Activities

As part of the pre-arranged package of activities, a coach was provided at the weekends to transport the group to local places of interest. During this time the delegation visited cultural sights and tourist attractions in Hangzhou and Shanghai. The visits also included ample opportunity for shopping, which was a very popular activity for the British students. Some students had not previously experienced the art of price negotiation for purchases, and with the rate of currency exchange so beneficial for prices, a shopping ‘frenzy’ gripped the group.

Leisure time was limited during the weekdays as English teaching activities continued until 9pm. Small groups of students often spent the latter part of the evening reflecting on the experiences of the day. On some occasions, activities were arranged on the campus: an outdoor concert, a food fair and a multicultural show which included a performance from the NEWI delegation.

The campus was fairly isolated, but inevitably the British students found a karaoke bar nearby. However, their very late return to the university that night prompted heavy criticism from the Chinese professor.

Attitudes

A very structured timetable of activities was organised for the NEWI delegation and each student and tutor was provided with a schedule for the English project. The programme with the Chinese students was scheduled to finish at 10.30pm and persistent negotiations were required to reduce this time to 9pm. The sessions were scheduled in the dormitory blocks which were spread across a very large campus and there were some concerns from students and staff regarding safety at night. Furthermore, there was uncertainty from some of the NEWI students who were housed in single sex dormitories of the opposite sex. However, since the campus was regarded as a safe environment, the Chinese professors found it difficult to understand the safety concerns expressed by the NEWI delegation.

At ZJGSU it was evident that there was a concerted effort to want to understand and accommodate western approaches for future exchanges. There was a strong desire to learn, and constructive criticism was welcomed to improve communication and co-operation. Invitations to a Chinese banquet were extended to the tutors at lunch time on more than one occasion and the exchange of presents was customary.

Rewarding achievement was regarded as very important and the NEWI students were presented with certificates to acknowledge their teaching contribution to the Spoken English Promotion Project. The visit has since prompted some of the NEWI students to consider teaching as a career.
Problems Encountered

The visit presented some initial difficulties with UK students finding it hard to acclimatise themselves to their new surroundings. There were inevitably some tensions associated with living together in such close confinement for two weeks. Unlike the Chinese students, NEWI students were not used to sharing a room. In advance of the visit, care was taken to allocate rooms to students who were friends with each other, but that was not always possible. Hence, there were some conflicts and tears, but also a lot of shared, valuable experiences.

Campus meals often included body parts of animals which students and staff were not prepared to eat, such as chickens’ feet, beaks, fish tails and internal organs. Although there were extensive efforts on behalf of the Chinese to provide suitable alternative food, a number of the students lost a lot of weight. Some relief came with the occasional KFC and restaurant meals at weekends; including Chinese and western food.

Students were over-eager to shop for bargains and there were difficulties with overweight cases at the airport on the return to Britain. Stressful negotiations reduced the threat of a large overweight baggage bill to a more manageable amount.

Evaluation

The staff and students from NEWI experienced an insight to the study life at a Chinese university. In comparison with British students, they felt that the Chinese students had limited privacy and freedom; four students sharing a room with no computers allowed during the first study year, no visitors of the opposite sex in
dormitories, ‘lights out’ at 11am and permission required to leave the campus at weekends.

The study visit provided an exhausting but rewarding experience for the UK students and lecturers. Engagement with the Chinese students often extended beyond the English sessions, with basketball games, food tasting and socialising. Students from both nationalities were inquisitive about each other’s everyday life and the visit developed significant cultural awareness in the NEWI delegation.

Very few of the NEWI students had previous experience of teaching and this challenge offered them a career prospect which they might not have considered before the visit. The students were invited to return to work in China as English teaching assistants, and although no-one has yet taken up this opportunity, subsequently a number of them have decided to pursue a career in teaching.

On return to the UK, the ensuing presentations and students’ reflective comments showed an appreciation of a population whose eagerness to learn was impressive. The assessment was a core study element for the business students, but there was some dissatisfaction with the lack of effort from the non-business students within the groups, who were awarded a certificate for this additional study. Separate groups of business and non-business students might have been a better option for the group work.

All activities were well organised and the success of the visit was attributable to the preparatory work at NEWI and at ZJGSU. Although the visit included some sightseeing activities at weekends, the long working hours during the weekdays provided a very demanding schedule.

One of the original intentions was for NEWI tutors to engage in discussion with the Chinese professors with regard to future engagements and progression of relationships. However, this was not possible; partly due to lack of time, but also etiquette, where there was some reticence to engage in discussions with female tutors who did not command the authority of head of school or principal.

Discussion

There were no bars or clubs provided for the students on the ZJGSU campus, although alcohol was not forbidden. Social life was confined to the campus with film shows, concerts, food fairs and sporting activities. It is understandable that there is minimum participation on the part of Chinese students into the UK ‘social scene’ and British universities need to be sensitive to the different leisure needs of international students.

A firmly structured timetable of activities was arranged for the NEWI delegation and there was little opportunity for any deviation. The forever friendly and pleasant attitude from the Chinese seemed to be genuine, but there was a
reluctance to ‘lose face’ when changes to their plans were requested. It is not surprising that it is sometimes difficult for UK lecturers to really appreciate the problems encountered by Chinese students when their friendly and pleasant exterior can sometimes hide the anxieties they may be experiencing.

This type of interaction between the UK and Chinese students was very successful and could be a useful vehicle for interaction between multinational groups within the UK. English sessions within UK universities are surely not greeted with as much enthusiasm. Although the development of subject specialist language is essential for achievement within a UK university course, an extended induction activity could involve similar small group discussions with UK and international students on topics of mutual interest. Providing training and funding for the UK students to act as ‘student teachers’ would raise the profile of the task and might encourage engagement.

The China visit provided staff and students with an opportunity to gain some insight into some of the learning styles and background experiences of Chinese students. The exposure to the Chinese learning environment provided a rich learning experience and helped to promote intercultural communication skills. As Ryan and Carroll (2007) indicate, immersion in the cultural and social experience provides a deeper understanding to cultural awareness which will assist in promoting an integrated approach to study in a multicultural context.

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Biography

Sandra King is a Senior Lecturer in the Business School at North East Wales Institute of Higher Education (NEWI) in Wrexham and is currently programme leader for the business degree programme. Her academic interests include statistical analysis, quantitative methods and research methodology, but she is also involved with the pastoral care and support of students. During November 2006 she organised and led the study visit to China. She was awarded a teaching fellowship in 2007-08 to study and develop an understanding of the factors which affect the learning and teaching of international students.
References


