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A Journey of Cross-Cultural Adaptation: An Autoethnography of a Vietnamese Graduate Student in The American Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural adaptation is not a new area of study, however, there is very little research focusing on the cross-cultural adaptation of Vietnamese students studying in America. The process of cross-cultural adaptation occurs naturally and necessarily regardless of the intentions of the individuals as long as they continuously engage in communication with the host environment and are functionally dependent on it. This research examines on the difference, the challenge and the way Vietnamese students have undergone throughout the process of adaptation from the original Asian culture to American culture, especially in the classroom context. The theoretical construct to guide the study includes the theory of cross-cultural adaptation, the model of cross-cultural adaptation process and the cross-cultural adaptation competences. The study adopts autoethnography as a research method, in which researcher used self-reflection as a Vietnamese graduate student studying in America to explore personal experience and connected this autobiographical story to wider cultural and social understandings. The findings of this study provides recommendations and orientations for Vietnamese students as well as Asian students in American colleges and universities and suggestions on how university communities can help international students in their process of adapting to host culture.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Adaptation; Cross-cultural Adaptation Competences; Vietnamese students; Autoethnography.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Rationale

It was December 28th, 2016 when I had my first step in the United States. After landing at the airport in Chicago, I went to Starbucks and ordered a drink after an exhausting 24-hour flight. It took me almost fifteen minutes just to order a cappuccino drink since the barista could not understand me and I could not understand how she talked as well. She asked me something and all my answers to her were "err…yes…err…no". She stared at me and in one moment, I believed I was the strangest creature that she had ever met in her work shift that day. Then, I received a Frappuccino drink instead, which was absolutely not what I wanted. Holding my first drink ever in America, I told myself that my life started to become terrible! After that, on many occasions, I have felt very awkward and quite uncomfortable as I have failed to communicate with people here. However, communication was not the only dramatic problem that I have had to confront since moving to America.

Coming to America for higher education, I prepared myself that there would be numerous differences between the lifestyle in my home country - Vietnam and in the new environment in America, however, I still feel overwhelmed by the new culture. The beliefs, values, and norms from my Asian background that formed my social behavior no longer seem to function well in my new context in the United States. My first semester at Eastern Illinois University – a regional university in the Midwest of United States was extremely struggling. I was overwhelmed by the various teaching styles of my professors, the topic people discussed in different classes, the overload of information and reading for each class, and the speed and outspokenness of my classmates. As a result, I was slightly afraid and I mostly kept quiet in class. The differences in social and cultural manners in daily life also sometimes made me feel stressful and disoriented.

However, since I consider myself as an open-minded person, I realized that what I needed was the desire and courage to embark on my journey of cultural transformation to adapt to the new culture, even if it was obviously challenging for me. I find it interesting and inspirational to look back at what I have undergone and how I have changed in two years studying in the United States in order to gain a better understanding of myself. This personal rationale led me to conduct this autoethnographic research, in which I use self-reflection as a Vietnamese graduate student at Eastern Illinois University in the year 2017 and 2018, to discover how personal experiences can connect to a story of larger cultural and social understandings of cross-cultural adaptation. I fully acknowledge that the accounts of my experiences will not exactly reflect the experiences of other Vietnamese students in the United State; however, I hope my personal narratives will reveal some distinguished aspects of the adapting process, as well as the challenges to the cross-cultural adaptation in a specific educational context. Further, I aim to propose some practical orientations and recommendations for Vietnamese students who will embark on their own journey of cross-cultural adaptation.

Cross-cultural adaptation is not a new area of study. Cross-cultural adaptation has been investigated extensively across social science disciplines since the 1930s in the United States, a nation that has dealt with a large and continuous influx of immigrants (Kim, 2017). There are also numerous studies which focus on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in the United States. Liu (2001) emphasized the crucial nature and role of cross-cultural adaptation, noting that as long as international students continuously engage in communication with the host environment and are functionally dependent on it, the adaptive cultural transformation will occur naturally and necessarily regardless of the intentions of the individuals. In other words, almost all international students in American campuses experience some amount of cultural transformation

and adaptation (Anarbaeva, 2009). Anarbaeva (2009) investigated the factors which appear to affect cross-cultural adaptation for international students; why some assimilate, why some do so more quickly than others, and why some fail to participate at all in the host culture. The study found that the adaptation level is influenced by intercultural communication apprehension.

While cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation occur to the majority of international students in American institutions and colleges, there are different patterns in the adaptation of Asian students because of their distinguished cultural and social background. The cross-culture adaptation of Asian students in America becomes a fruitful topic for numerous researchers. Lee & Ciftci (2013) examined the influence of multicultural personality, assertiveness, social support, and academic self-efficacy on Asian international students' socio-cultural adjustment in America. The study showed that both multicultural personality and assertiveness were associated with socio-cultural adaptation, which was mediated by academic self-efficacy. Although multicultural personality was associated with social support, bootstrapping results indicated that there was no indirect effect from social support to socio-cultural adaptation (Lee & Ciftci, 2013). In other words, the process of socio-cultural adaptation is an individual process in which personal characteristics and identities play an important role in the success of adaptation. A study by Jiang (2010) focusing on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese engineering students in American graduate school highlighted that cross-cultural adaptation is equally important as it is a natural and inevitable part of the student's journey in the U.S. The quality of Chinese students' educational experience is influenced by how they perceive and adapt to challenges posed by cultural differences (Jiang, 2010). Coming from the same cultural background, however, because of the distinguished in personality, expectation and life experiences, each participant in this study experienced and constructed cross-cultural adaptation in a different way (Jiang, 2010).

Many researchers are conducted to study the cross-cultural adaptation of Asian students in the United States, however, there is limited research on Vietnamese students. One study about Vietnamese students' cross-cultural adaptation is the *"East Meets West: Adaptation of Vietnamese International Students to California Community Colleges"* by Tam Do (2007). This paper explored seven adaptation aspects that include language and communication, cultural awareness, loneliness and isolation, new educational settings, financial concerns, gender-based differences, and the political impact of the anti-communist Vietnamese American community (Do, 2007). The study showed that the lack of cultural awareness and the feeling of isolation and loneliness were two main issues that cause severe adaptation problems for these students (Do, 2007). It also found that the political difference between the Vietnamese international students and the Vietnamese American community does exist and is a serious impediment to the students' adaptation process (Do, 2007). While this study revealed the challenges existing to Vietnamese students to adapt to American community colleges, there was a lack of practical orientations and recommendations for Vietnamese students to overcome the obstacles during this adaptive process. The research was conducted focusing on the students' adaptation under political and social aspects rather than in academic and educational context.

Considering cross-cultural adaptation as a natural and necessary intercultural and interpersonal communication process (Liu, 2001), I aim to explore the cultural adaption process of Vietnamese students in America. I will concentrate on the classroom context since this educational setting is one of the most important communication channels for students (Liu, 2001). Through communication in the classroom, students tend to express their assumptions, values, rules, customs practices, and procedures from their personal identity and background (Liu, 2001). As Ting-Toomey (1999) posited, "It is through the mirror of others that we learn to know

ourselves, and it is through facing our own discomfort and anxiety that we learn to stretch and grow" (p. 8), American classroom with its diverse nature provides a lens to observe and investigate interpersonal and intercultural communication.

This study is significant for international students, especially Vietnamese students in the United States. Vietnam remains the sixth leading country of origin for all international students in the United States, in both higher education and in secondary schools. According to the US Department of Homeland Security Student and Exchange Visitor Information System's (SEVIS) December 2017 figures, there were 31,389 active Vietnamese students in the United States, a number that reflects the steady growth in enrollment of Vietnamese students in American education over the last 16 years (Institute of International Education, 2018). Coming from an Asian background, with different beliefs, values, and norms, Vietnamese students may face difficulties adapting to a new culture. Vietnamese educational behaviors are highly impacted by Confucian philosophy. Confucian values impact students learning approach or style, which values silence, face-saving, and group harmony, for example. Confucianism has also had a significant influence on Asian educational success because of its emphasis on strong family-oriented structure and a high valuation of education. These traditional values are considered negative attitudes in American classrooms, and thus students affected by a Confucian-heritage culture to a great extent might be described as shy, passive, reluctant to speak up, and unwilling to actively participate in class (Chung, 2015). Agreeing with Tierney's (1992) statement, which considered university reflecting the culture of dominant society, Dunphy (1998) argued that American universities are full of their own visible and invisible conventions, such as student attitudes, rules for faculty-student interaction, and rules for class presentations, which may be unknown to foreign students. Thus, international students from Confucian-heritage culture like Vietnam bringing different

assumptions and expectations might feel more challenged than their European counterparts due to their different cultural values. Therefore, studying about cross-cultural adaptation processes and challenges that Asian students in general and Vietnamese students, in particular, confront during this process can bring benefits to those who are studying and planning to study in the United States.

American educators and institutions could also take advantage of this project's findings in order to recruit prospective international students and in helping current international students to adapt to the host culture. Besides helping to maintain desired levels of enrollment, international students bring to American institutions a diversity of academic and social perspectives (Liu, 2001). The presence of international students promotes intercultural interactions, develops intercultural friendships and ultimately, results in international understanding, and further creates a multicultural environment for American institutions. International students also have an extremely important economic impact on the United States (Liu, 2001). International students contributed $39.4 billion to the U.S. economy in 2017. (Institute of International Education, 2018). Considering the significant role of international students and the challenges they confront when studying and living in America, American colleges and universities should better understand and provide more practical activities and orientations to help international students adapt to their new environment. American institutions could also benefit from the project's findings to strategically promote their image and attract future international students.

This study utilizes autoethnography as a research method in which I aim to connect self-discourse and personal narratives to wider understandings about social and cultural ideologies. While personal stories have gained a legitimized place in the literary field, stories as data or method were considered too subjective to be articulated in the field of research. Much of traditional mainstream research was oriented toward the modernist paradigm. Traditional scholars believed

that the existence of unified foundations of truth, and that knowledge should be proven by a rational, objective method (Hollinger, 1994). Therefore, traditional research studies have considered personal experience unpredictable and emotional and consequently doubted its validity as a primary source of data. However, with this project, I aim to support the ideology of postmodernism which questions how people, places, and practices come to be "represented" in qualitative research texts (Burnier, 2006). Bruner (2004) suggested that these personal discourse and narrative are not fictions (in the sense that they are untrue) but rather constructed accounts of key life events and our interactions with others. It encourages a "dialogue with the world" that shapes individual meanings and understandings of human experiences (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 74). Therefore, I believe autoethnography, self-discourse and narratives are powerful in order to study interpersonal communication and communication studies in general. This project hopes to fuel the need for further research in communications studies with the discussion of self-discourse and the use of narratives as a way of knowing.

Literature review

For the literature review, I will explore and explain the cross-cultural adaptation theoretical terrain by discussing (1) the concept of cross-cultural adaptation, (2) cross-cultural adaptation process and the challenges existed in adapting process, and (3) intercultural communication competencies. While the concept of cross-cultural adaption and cross-cultural adaptation process bring an overview to international students to perceive what probably occurs when they enter a new environment, the cross-cultural communication competences propose practical knowledge, motivation, and skills to international students in order to interact and communicate effectively and appropriately within the host culture.

Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory

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Adaptation, by definition, means "the internal transformation of an individual challenged by a new cultural environment in the direction of increasing fitness and compatibility in that environment" (Kim, 1988, p. 9). Like all human adaptation experiences, cross-cultural adaptation takes place through the communicative interface of an individual and a new and unfamiliar cultural environment in which the individual needs to carry out his or her daily functions. As such, Kim (2001) defined cross-cultural adaptation as "the entirety of the dynamic process by which individuals who, through direct and indirect contact and communication with a new, changing, or changed environment, strive to establish (or reestablish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (p. 31). Liu (2001) also supported this idea by defining cross-cultural adaptation as a process in which people constantly adjust their original cultural behaviors, values, and beliefs to those of the host culture and gradually develop the multiple identities necessary to operate in different intercultural communication contexts. This process occurs in order to perform communication in an appropriate, effective, and meaningful way. In this process, people have to (1) constantly walk in a narrow path while balancing different identities, (2) forego stability to regain stability, (3) risk losing trust to regain trust, and (4) be willing to become anonymous in the unknown territory to be a full-fledged, recognized member of that new culture (Ting-Toomey, 1999). People also have to constantly negotiate the theme of being-and-becoming as they learn to acquire new roles and new adaptive skills in the target culture. There are various scholars who have conducted research about the adaptive cultural transformation. They described this process as a "roller-coaster ride" (Anderson, 1994), an "identity stretch" (Lazarus, 1991), or the "identity tug-and-pull experience'' (Ting-Toomey, 1999)."

Cross-cultural adaptation is a process that involves several dimensions and that is generally influenced by numerous levels including system-level, individual-level, and interpersonal-level (Liu, 2001). According to Liu (2001), the system-level factors are the elements in the host environment that influence newcomers to adapt to the new culture. They include the host culture's socioeconomic conditions, the attitude and stance of host culture on cultural assimilation, the local institutions such as universities and colleges that serve as direct contact agencies, the definition of the host culture differentiating insiders from outsiders, and the cultural distance between the two cultures. All these factors have an influence on international students' cross-cultural adaptation.

Individual-level factors that have been found to influence cross-culture adaptation include motivational orientations, individual expectation, the knowledge about the host culture and personality attributes. Interpersonal-level factors include relational face-to-face network factors (social networks), mediated contact factors (the use of mass media) and interpersonal skill factors. The simultaneous interaction of all these factors in different levels makes the cross-cultural adaptation a distinction for international students when they adapt to a new culture (Liu, 2001).

Cross-cultural Adaptation Process

Cross-cultural adaptation is "a complex, multi-staged process of cultural encounters" (Sussman, 2002). There has been growing academic attention to this cross-cultural adaptation process in the United States. According to Berry (1980), cultural adaptation refers to individuals' possible responses to the new cultural context, no matter whether they chose to assimilate (with a strong orientation toward the host culture), separate (with a strong faithfulness to the original culture and dispassion from the host culture), integrate (with the blending of the original culture and the new culture), or marginalize (with the rejection of both cultures).

Bennett (1986) considered cultural adaptation as a journey of learning and recovery. According to Bennett (1986), for short-term sojourners and long-term immigrants, this model viewed the adaptive cultural transformation process as a step-by-step journey from the edge of culture to the center, from the ignorance of a position to understanding and empathy. Anderson (1994) also supported this ideology by emphasizing cross-cultural adaptation as essentially a learning process. For successful adaptation, the sojourners must acquire sociocultural skills. That is, to adapt to a culture, sojourners should learn both the rules for interpreting their environment and the rules for comforting themselves within it (Anderson, 1994).

In the 1950s, Lysgaard (1955) in his study of Norwegian Fulbright scholars in the United States conducted the U-curve model which has became a commonly adopted model to describe sojourners' adjustment. He stated "Adjustment as a process over time seem[ed] to follow a U-shaped curve: adjustment [was] felt to be easy and successful, to begin with; then follow[ed] a 'crisis' in which one [felt] less well-adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally, one [began] to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community. (Lysgaard, 1955, p. 50). The research suggested that sojourners initially experience a "honeymoon phase" in which everything about the new culture is attractive, followed by a stressful, depressing phase in which the differences between their home culture and the new one seem overwhelming, and finally, the period when sojourners adjust to their new environment.

Other researchers (Adler, 1981; Brown, 1980; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Mohamed, 1997; Oberg, 1960) have conducted research building on Lysgaard's theory. Oberg (1960) originally used terms such as 'honeymoon', 'crisis', 'recovery', and 'adjustment' to illustrate the four stages of the U-curve model. Based on a sojourner's self- and cultural awareness, Adler (1981) then separated the culturally adaptive process into five stages: initial contact (exciting and fresh

experience), disintegration (confusing and disoriented period), reintegration (rejection of the second stage), autonomy (understanding the host culture), and independence (gaining benefit from cultural differences and similarities). Overall, the U-curve model regarding cross-cultural adjustment has been commonly used to interpret the changing process of sojourners' adjustment to cultural transition – from positive and new feelings at first, negative responses in the succeeding period, and compromising and achieving balance at the end. Based on this model, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) conducted a six-stage W-shaped model which included: the honeymoon, hostility, humorous, at-home, reentry culture shock, and resocialization stages. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) enlarge the model to The W-Shaped Revised Adjustment Model, reflect the sojourners adapting to the host culture and then, returning to their culture of origin after some time away. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) include descriptions of how the sojourner feels at each of the seven stages. For example, at the hostility stage, a sojourner is often frustrated by his or her inability to accomplish things that would be easy to do in their home culture while at the humorous stage, the sojourner begins to feel a greater sense of comfort and can see their life more objectively, even finding humor in some of their new experiences. The W-Shaped Revised Adjustment Model also includes the two final stages when sojourners return to his or her native environment and find it different to what he or she had remembered while at the same time the sojourner may feel a sense of alienation and grief at the loss of the relationships left behind in the new environment.

Recently, Kim (2005) addressed the essential nature of the adaptation process that applies to all strangers who share the common challenge of bridging the gap between their internalized cultural habits and those of the new environment which include: enculturation (entering a new culture is like starting an enculturation process), acculturation (the learning and acquisition of the new cultural patterns and practices), deculturation (an internal transformation, from visible

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changes in superficial areas) and assimilation (the maximum possible convergence of internal and external conditions to those of the natives). Kim (2005) also proposed the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic model to captures the dialectic, cyclic, and continual draw-back-to-leap process of adaptive change that commonly takes place in individuals over time. She emphasized the crucial role of stress in the adaptation process. Each stressful experience is responded to with a "drawback" (or a state of regression), which, in turn, activates adaptive energy to help individuals reorganize themselves and "leap forward." (Kim, 2001; Kim, 2005). The stress-adaptation-growth transformative process continues as long as there are new challenges of contact and communication with the host environment, with the overall forward and upward movement in the direction of greater adaptation and growth. Kim also argues that "as we keep our sight on the goal of successful adaptation in the host society, we experience a gradual personal identity transformation—a subtle and largely unconscious change that leads to increasingly intercultural personhood "(Kim, 2008, p.362). It means the cross-cultural adaptation process could bring the development in perceptual and emotional maturity and a deeper understanding of human conditions as people are challenged to step into a domain that reaches beyond our original cultural boundaries. Personal identity, although can never be completely replaced by a new one, it can be transformed into something that will always contain some of the old and the new side by side. Experiencing the cross-cultural adaptation process, people are able to shape a new perspective that allows more openness and acceptance of differences, a capacity to participate in the depth of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional experience of others (Kim, 2008).

Clearly, researchers have different perspectives to explore the complex process of cross-cultural adaptation, however, it is obvious from these diverse models that cross-cultural adaptation theory views the adaptation process as a dynamic interaction between an individual's internal

systems and the new cultural challenges from their environment. Most researchers have assumed that newcomers probably witness various challenges to adjust to newly changed circumstances such as lack of language competence, homesickness and so on (Liu, 2001). Traditional studies of cultural adaptation have also assumed that individuals from different cultures desired to assimilate into the host culture, and therefore, investigated variables encouraging or discouraging the adaptation process in helping to facilitate the individuals' assimilation into the new environment. However, the attempt for generalizable assimilation patterns of adaption has raised an argument (Liu, 2001). Researchers argued against cultural assimilation, noting that adaptation is not a matter of unavoidable necessity to survive in a host culture but more of a matter of choice depending on individuals' sense of ethnic identity (Kim, 2001). Additionally, with the development of technology and media, more individuals living far away from their original culture still maintain a strong connection with their country of origin while adapting to the new culture (Brettell, 2000; Lewellen, 2002).

Regardless of different views on cross-cultural adaptation, many existing studies demonstrate that individuals from a different culture and background experience changing in different ways and levels (Chung, 2015). An autoethnography work of Crist (2009) examined the transitions into cross-cultural work and assessment in South Africa. Chung (2015), as a Korean student mother in America, used autoethnography to discover the cross-cultural adaption in the discourse of education and motherhood. As a female graduate student coming from the same Confucian-heritage cultural backgrounds, I felt connected and empathy with many of her stories regarding what challenged she had been through, how she had made adaptive changes in the context of American education. This is to say, Chung (2015) study not only contributes to her academic field of philosophy but also creates a personal impact and influence on her audiences.

The research also informed me of the power of personal narratives as research data and autoethnography as a methodology.

In discovering my cross-cultural adaptation as a Vietnamese graduate student in the context of the American classroom, I will utilize Lysgaard (1955)'s U-curve model. U-curve model is commonly evaluated as "intuitively appealing" and "a convenient, common sense heuristic for understanding cross-cultural adaptation" (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, p.82). For this reason, a researcher can introduce the U-curve model to sojourners as a frame of reference to understand their identity change process (Ting-Toomey, 1999). With this model, the sojourners may be able to compare their own experiences to the U-curve providing the supporting or refuting the trends of the curves or the characteristics of each stage. On the other hand, more recent reviews of research have concluded that support for the U-curve hypothesis is limited (Anderson, 1994) and the evidence for the model is now 'weak, inconclusive and overgeneralized' (Church, 1982, p.542). Ward et al. (1998) argued that there are two main shortcomings of the empirical research behind the U-curve model: "first, the majority of the studies that had explicitly investigated the phenomenon had been based on cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal designs. Secondly, there was some conceptual confusion over the definition and measurement of sojourner "adjustment"' (p. 279). Notwithstanding this drawbacks, I think the U-curve model is probably appropriate for my project. Considering the target audiences is international students, the model is visually appealing and simple to understand and identify with. The model establishes the normalness of cross-cultural adjustment process and challenges while still appreciating the individuality of the process, therefore, international students could possibly find the need to prepare for the challenges when entering a new culture. This model is also suitable to my aim of investigating a realistic understanding and make sense of my adaptation experiences in American classroom rather than

examine abstractly the process is successful or not. And finally, s a researcher, I also aim to re-examine the relevant issues associated with the U-curve model in the light of the central position it has held over 40 years in research and theory on cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation.

Intercultural Communication Competence

Central to the cross-cultural adaptation process is cross-cultural or intercultural communication competence, the ability to communicate in accordance with the norms and practices of the host culture and actively engage in its social communication processes (Spitzberg, 1991; Kim, 2008; Chen, 2010). Intercultural is generally defined as the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriate with members of a host culture (Wiseman, 2002; Chen, 2010). Liu (2001) also supported this concept by explaining intercultural communication competence as "the ability of an individual to communicate appropriately and effectively in the target culture by expanding his or her social identity to one that blends the new set of values, habits, and social norms endorsed in the target culture with those in the home country" (p.224). I believe intercultural communication competence is a vital factor, a very engine driving the cross-cultural adaptation process of sojourners and international students in particular. Just as we cannot learn to swim without actually plunging into the water, we cannot effectively adapt to a new cultural environment without actually getting involve and interacting with the host culture. With intercultural communication competences, an international student could possibly conduct and maintain successful adaptation to a new culture but also can negotiate and mark their own identities in different social settings (Liu, 2001).

Intercultural communicative competence is a complex phenomenon with multiple components. Williams (2001) stated there are three vital components to developing cultural competence. They include self-knowledge/awareness; experience and knowledge about a

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particular culture; and positive change or action for successful interaction with the identified culture. Kim (2008) regards that intercultural communication competence comprises of three levels: cognitive level, effective level, and behavioral or performative level. Kim's ideology is an emerging consensus among scholars (Bennett, 2000; Chen,2010).

Chen (2010) conceptualized the cognitive aspects of intercultural communication competence as intercultural awareness. It captures the ability for people to perceive and accurately interpret verbal messages and nonverbal cues, which requires an insider's knowledge of host culture features, including values, beliefs, societal patterns, family roles, and social interaction norms. Understanding the host cultural features is significant important especially for Asian students since their original cultural background is remarkably different from Western culture. A simple behavior such as chewing gum could be judged as disrespect in Asian classroom while it is acceptable in the American context. In Asian educational settings, silence is interpreted as an appropriate form of showing respect for instructors and also expressing they are listening attentively while in the American classroom, students are encouraged to freely raise their voice. Acquiring the difference rooted in culture in each educational settings helps international students adjust their behaviors appropriate within the host environment.

Second, the affective component involves the ability and motivation to appreciate, empathize, and be respectful and responsive to the emotional and aesthetic experiences of host-culture members and accepting of cross-cultural differences. Ting-Toomey (1999) conceptualized the affective aspects of intercultural communication competence as "culture-sensitive knowledge and mindful reflexivity" (p.39), Kim (2008) calls it as identity flexibility and aesthetic emotion while Chen (2010) considers this aspect as intercultural sensitivity. The effective component of intercultural communication competence requires an international student to understand cultural

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values and be willing to participate in the new culture. Equipped with culture-sensitive, mindfulness and flexibility, Asian students still need to attend to their internal assumptions, cognitions, and emotions and simultaneously be adjusted to the assumptions, cognitions, and emotions of those in the target culture and specifically, in American classrooms. As I experienced in American classrooms, topics about sexuality, LGBT and politics are normally discussed in class while they have still remained taboo in some Asian classrooms. Rather than avoiding and resisting, the openness and positive attitude towards the differences could significantly benefit international students. Intercultural sensitivity and flexibility allow Asian students to see both the differences and similarities between their original culture and new culture and further gaining new insights and develop an alternative set of personal and cultural experiences which function appropriately in the new environment.

Last but not least, the behavioral component addresses the ability to function in the host society. Kim (2001) explained, "Through the use of culturally sanctioned communication patterns, people perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as socially 'normal' or 'healthy' individuals" (p. 49). Chen (2010) viewed the behavioral aspects of intercultural communication competence as primarily capturing effectiveness, but preferred the term adroitness to describe the ability to successfully apply both intercultural awareness and sensitivity. That being said, behavioral dimension is closely linked with cognitive and affective dimension. How international students negotiating their identities, actively engaging in classroom participation, adjusting their appearance and behaviors after observing and learning from other classmates from the host culture could be considered as the behavioral aspect of intercultural communication competence.

Overall, intercultural communication competence addresses not only what competencies one needs in successful cross-cultural adaption process, but also why and how such competencies

can mark one's identities in different social settings. These competencies will benefit Asian students and other international students in the host culture in their journey toward adaptive cultural transformation, and also benefit individuals in this target culture by helping them to be open-minded and sensitive to Asian students' cultural beliefs, values, and habits. In this study, I will use the intercultural communication competence in order to examine the adaptation competencies of Vietnamese student in the context of the American classroom.

Research questions:

The main theme throughout this project is the complex social, cultural, and educational adaptation process that a Vietnamese student had been through during the time in an American classroom. Drawing upon discourses and ideologies about cross-cultural adaptation, I aim to investigate how these discourses and ideologies impact me and other Vietnamese students. I raise these following questions:

RQ.1: What experiences do a Vietnamese student encountered in adapting to American culture and to American classroom context in particular?

RQ.2: What challenges exist for Vietnamese student during the cross-culture adaptation to the American classroom and how Vietnamese student overcome these challenges?

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHOD

Autoethnography as a research method

In this study, I utilize autoethnography as a research method. Ellis & Bochner (2000) defined autoethnography as a genre of writing, research, self-narrative, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal interpretation (graphy) to the cultural, placing the self (auto) within a social or political context (ethno). Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) also stated it succinctly by describing autoethnography as "a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and context, to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others" (p.1). Autoethnography challenges traditional writing conventions that attempt to validate empirical science and uphold the power that accompanies scientific knowledge (Wall, 2006). In an autoethnography, the researcher is not trying to become an insider in the research setting. He or she, in fact, is the insider (Duncan, 2004). Autoethnography then differs from other methodologies because the researcher is the subject of the study. The researcher is able to draw connections from his or her personal life to the lives of others or extend understanding about a particular culture or society (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography roots in the personal life of the researcher, thereby, summoning rich and contextualized information about various subjects. Autoethnography is usually expressed through alternative means of representation such as poems, performances, or narratives.

However, the inclusion of a researcher's narratives into study has triggered some criticism about the autoethnographic approach that personal data is biased and thus non-scientific (Hollinger, 1994). Researchers feared that any display of subjectivity would somehow infect the quality of their work, and they tried to keep their voices out of the texts they produce (Muncey, 2010). However, Ellis et al. (2011) argued contrarily, autoethnography seeks to support the

blurring of divisive lines between the disciplines, and asserts that "research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena" (Ellis et al., 2011, p.11). It is a methodology that embraces differences and creativity, rather than requiring researchers to adhere to traditional, canonical forms of doing research. Ellis et al. (2011) also emphasized autoethnography helps "reduce prejudice, encourage personal responsibility and agency, raise consciousness and promote cultural change, and give people a voice that, before writing, they may not have felt they had" (p.280). According to Ellis et al. (2011), the most important questions to autoethnographers are: "who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going" (p. 284).

As I mentioned above, I aim to discover and understand myself and simultaneously, connect my adapting experiences to a wider cultural and social understanding about the cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural communication in general. Therefore, the autoethnographic approach is to be suitable for conveying my cultural experiences as a Vietnamese student in the United States. The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression (Wall, 2008). In other words, autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers me a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding. Besides, the curiosity and joy of discovery are also a key motive for me to become engaged in this research.

Since I was exploring the subjective reality of international students and Asian students specifically, then autoethnography was the ideal method of choice, particularly because it allowed me to focus on the intimate and personal lived experiences of an under-represented population in American society. Through autoethnography, I am able to highlight voices that are sometimes

rendered speechless. Devault (1997) wrote, "The personal account makes excluded voices —hearable within a dominant discourse—it is compelling in part because it reveals in vivid detail those whose presence might not be noticed if they spoke abstractly" (p. 226). Clearly, conducting autoethnography gives me a chance to share my voice, the voice of an Asian student as a minority in an American classroom.

Last but not least, I chose autoethnography because this methodology is "reader-friendly" in that the personally engaging writing style tends to appeal to readers more than conventional scholarly writing (Chang, 2008, p.52). Nash (2004) also emphasized this idea that "scholarly personal narratives liberate researchers from abstract, impersonal writings and touch reader's lives by informing their experiences' (p.28). With autoethnography, I can offer readers to become a part of the research process. I want to tell a story that readers can enter and feel a part of, in order to "evoke readers to feel and think about [their] life and their lives in relation to [mine] . . . to experience the experience [I am] writing about" (Ellis, 1999, p. 674). Considering the targeted audience of this study is Vietnamese students in particular and international students in general, I believe the autoethnographic method would be appropriate thanks to its potentiality of contributing to others' lives by making them reflect on and empathize with the narratives presented.

Procedure

Because of the value that autoethnography places on the personal experience of the researcher, participant observation is the core practice through which reflections are developed and all other data collection activities are organized (Duncan, 2004). Besides observation participant, I also use reflective journaling to produce a personal dataset in the form of field notes. Reflective journaling is considered a more culturally relevant way to gather data (James & Busher,2006). Engaging in self-reflection on academic experiences through reflective journaling

is a method of discovering and framing truths. James and Busher (2006) highlighted the strengths of reflective journaling associated with "allowing them to move back and forth through their narratives, thinking about their responses, drafting and redrafting what they want to write" (p. 406). In their view, this process results in a more grounded approach that improves understanding of academic experiences. Hubbs and Brand (2005) also posited the power of journaling that using journaling as a learning strategy offer students with opportunities to "mull over ideas, uncover inner secrets, and piece together life's unconnected threads" (p. 62).

Like ethnography, autoethnography also requires me to observe and take notes, especially when events excite, shock, anger, or cause feelings of isolation and alienation (Emerson et al., 1995). I had written my journals since January 2017 when I started my first semester at Eastern Illinois University. These field notes were taken in various educational settings such as class discussions, professor lectures, meetings after class, workshops and so on. The notes were written down on my notebook or directly on my laptop in both Vietnamese and English. Since many interactions made it difficult to be thorough in my field notes at the given time, I was limited to jotting down brief notes, which I used shortly after to jog my memory as I produced a more detailed account. Recording the data helped me process and critically analyze my experiences. Periodically, I revisited these field notes and used emotional recall to build a heightened level of complexity and richness into the data. Emotional recall is the use of imagery to place one's self back in the situation by paying attention to physical details, events, thoughts, and dialogue (Emerson et al., 1995). I also used storytelling to connect my brief notes into complete narratives Storytelling is defined as "a method of knowing" and a way of expressing our lives (Richardson, 1990). As humans, we live storied lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) in which our identities are shaped through the narratives we created and passed down. Polkinghorne (1988) posits that people use

narrative as a way to construct experience into a conversation, and, we use narrative as a way of knowing. For me, writing and telling my narratives have given me the opportunity to reflect, to have a better understanding and appreciate what I have experienced and predict where I continue to see myself going. Personal narratives as my primary research data are also rich and truthful. I believe what I have been through with the cultural adaption process in America is remarkably similar to the people' experiences who come from the same cultural background, but in the same time, interestingly distinguished thanks to personal identities.

Based on these personal data, I will interpret and connect them to wider social and cultural understandings. I conduct a mini-thematic analysis where I draw on multiple concepts that relate to broader themes of cross-cultural adaptation. To conduct this analysis, I use Owen's (1984) criteria for identifying a theme. "A theme was noted in relational discourse when three criteria were present: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, (3) and forcefulness" (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Recurrence takes place when the same meaning is present in at least two places throughout the same report; in this case, the narratives. While recurrence does not require the same wording to be used the repetition require the using of same words, phrases, or sentences. Lastly, forcefulness would refer to "the underlining of words and phrases, the increased size of print or use of colored markers circling or otherwise focusing on passages in the written reports" (Owen, 1984, p. 256). Within my entries, after thematic analysis, I divided my narratives into four categories. As I consider my journey of cross-cultural adaptation as cross ocean sailing journey, I named the categories as *(1) The Honeymoon; (2) Here come the waves; (3) Life-jacket and (4) Keep on sailing.*

One thing which challenges me when writing my autoethnography is that it requires "both personal and scholarly" aspects, writing autoethnography "is both descriptive and theoretical" (Burnier, 2006, p. 414). On one hand, I need to showcase interesting and valuable personal and

experiential stories. I also need to embrace the risks of presenting vulnerable self in research. On the other hand, these personal narratives need to be presented under a particular theoretical framework and have substantive contributions to knowledge. As mentioned in the first chapter, I will use the Lysgaard (1955)'s U-curve model to analyze my journals of Vietnamese students in American classrooms at a micro level. I also use adaptive cultural transformation competence theory in order to examine the adaptation competencies of Vietnamese students in the context of American classrooms.

Considerations & Limitations

"Researching, writing about and representing lives carries a heavy ethical burden regardless of whatever methodology, specific data collection methods, or presentational styles are adopted" (Sikes,2015, p.1). With an autoethnographic approach, ethical issues and truth level are further questioned and challenged. Autoethnography primarily takes the form of written narratives and, everyone who appears in the narrative is potential, if not explicitly, identified. In using personal narratives, researchers not only implicate themselves with their work but also close, intimate others (Adams, 2008). Therefore, "relational ethics" are becoming more intense in autoethnography. (Ellis et al., 2011). Tolich (2004) also concerned this relational risk that not only the researcher will expose confidences to outsiders, but confidences will also be exposed to other participants or members of their family, friendship or acquaintanceship networks. In order to avoid the relational ethical issues in this research, I acknowledge the responsibility to protect the confidentiality of individuals and the need to respectfully depict those people in my narratives. I try to protect the privacy and safety of others by altering identifying characteristics such as circumstances, topics discussed, or characteristics like race, gender, name, place, or appearance.

In the same time, I stay aware of how these protective devices can influence the integrity of the research as well as how my work could be interpreted and understood.

Another concern when writing autoethnography is about reliability, generalizability, and validity (Ellis et al., 2011). Reliability refers to the narrator's credibility whether the narrator has had the experiences described and given available "factual evidence". Closely related to reliability are issues of validity. It questions whether the work could evoke in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible; a feeling that what has been represented could be true or not (Ellis et al.,2011). Validity connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives. Generalizability is determined by whether the (specific) autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Readers provide validation by comparing their lives to ours, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why, and by feeling that the stories have informed them about unfamiliar people or live. It is important for me to acknowledges these issues when conducting autoethnography. I need to make sure to provide reliable, meaningful narratives that accurately reflect the actual events.

CHAPTER 3: THE JOURNEY

It was a morning in October, while I was staring at my computer in my office that I received the email from the graduate coordinator at Eastern Illinois University – a regional university in Midwest USA. My heart beat fast. The moment I clicked on the email and saw the tittle "Congratulations!", I could not stop myself from screaming out loud. After three months applying, I finally got the admission for a Master degree in Communication Studies! I could not believe my expectation for a higher education abroad came true! It was even more exciting since I was going to the United States! Yes! United States! In my mind and probably in the mindset of numerous Asian people, America is the land of dream, hope and opportunity. Going to America for higher education was not only the chance for me to learn in a prestigious, diverse and innovative environment but I could also actually experience and immerse in a culture that had a significant influence in my life. As a kid, I was obsessed with all the magic and fantasy from Disney World. As a teenager, I was growing up, spending hours watching Hollywood movies, TV series and listening to American popular music.

I know starting a new chapter of my life in the United States would be challenging and full of obstacles but the excitement and the eager to learning and experience new things motivated me a lot. I decided to quit my recent job which was so upset since it was my favorite job at this moment. I spent most of the time on the internet to search for what I needed to prepare before coming to America for higher education. I also contacted to my friends who already studied abroad in the United States to ask for advices. Their stories and other stories that I read on social media partly created my superior and promising fantasy about studying and living in America. The day I got on the plane, saying goodbye to all my family and friends was a sad day. But I had choices and I

chose to be on the plane to America. I did not know what this way would lead me to but I persuaded myself there would be thousands of exciting and interesting things were waiting for me.

The "Honeymoon"

My journey started on December 27th 2016 when I arrived America for the first time. I remembered it was a freezing gloomy night. I was on the shuttle bus from the airport to get to my university campus. All I could see through the blurry window was the darkness of the endless highway. Sometimes there was a dim light from the street signs. This night on the campus I was assigned to a dorm room with a Japanese girl. Even we were both exhausted after long flights, we were still thrilled talking about our plans and our expectations at the new land.

Next morning, I woke up and pulled out the curtain. The scenery was totally different from what I had been thinking about America with skyscrapers or bustling streets with hundreds of stores like in the Hollywood movies. In front of me at that time was an immense space, all the trees and buildings were covered with the white fluffy snow. This moment was so magical and peaceful but standing alone in the room I began to feel lonely and homesick. However, this feeling quickly passed. I need to prepare for the orientation organizing for new international students. At that day, I met and made friends with many students from other countries. We came from different countries, different backgrounds, coming to the university for different study programs but we all shared the same excitement and eagerness to start a new life here. I remembered it was 20 degrees Fahrenheit outside which for a person come from a tropical country like me, this weather was extremely freezing. However, the frosty weather could not stop us to take a school tour, discover every buildings and facility which the university offered. I was amazed by the grand library with thousands of books and novels, the modern laboratory with developed equipment and there was even an art center with various galleries and exhibitions on campus site. There were things that I

could merely see on TV before but now, I was fortunate to have chance to study and experience in a more innovative and comprehensive environment. The orientation also provided us essential information about program curriculum and all the useful resources to ease the transition into a new environment. At my graduate program, I was required to take three classes per semester which were equal to 9 credits. Compared to my undergraduate experience which I had to finish 18 to 20 credits per semester, the new study program could not be the obstacle for me, I believed. I used to think I would have had large amount of spare time to enjoy my life, traveling, shopping and hanging out with my friends since I only needed to be present in class twice in a week. After the academic orientation, I and other international students were taken to a community dinner, where we met a lot of kind and friendly local people. They bought us gifts like household stuffs and warm cloths so we could prepare for our new chapter in life. The first week went so fast. I felt being welcomed and taken care. I felt extremely excited and could not wait to start my first semester here.

As a student coming from Vietnam where the educational system was oriented by Confucian ideas, I considered the institute as a solemn, formal place where I was always well-prepared even in the appearance before going to class. I decided to wear a white sweater with jeans, a long wool trend coat and a pair of leather boots since it was freezing outside. I also did not forget to put make-up on. It was the first day at school so I needed to make a good impression! However, my first class did not start so well. I could not locate my classroom. I spent nearly ten minutes walking around the first floor to find the room 1731 until I met a girl and she said to me that the room began with number 1 was in the basement, not the first floor. After finally found the right classroom, I took a deep breath and walked lightly into my class. People were already there, they sat in a circle and were talking. I found a vacant seat in the back of the class. No sooner had

I sit than I started to felt the remarkably strange atmosphere in this classroom. There are black students on my left and white students on my right. I tried to wait for other Asian students until I realized that I was the only Asian here. When the class started, I was even more overwhelmed by the classroom climate. People vibrantly introduced themselves. They shared about their academic experiences, research interests and further plans which all sounded so sophisticated and brilliant. They wanted to work in famous non-profit government organizations or some wanted to go for Ph.D. When it came to my turn, I was so nervous. My heart beat faster. I slightly said: "Hi, my name is Tram. I come from Vietnam. I hope I can survive through this semester!". "Oh no! Why did I say this ridiculous thing? It was so low-level!"- I talked to myself. Obviously, all of my classmates laughed. My face turned red and I was so embarrassing. "Ok! It will be fine. Nobody will remember about this!" – I thought, tried to keep calm and took another deep breath. This awkward moment passed, I started looking around, noticing my classmates and my professor. People seemed to prefer wearing in a comfortable and freestyle way. I saw my classmates in a simple t-shirt, hoodies, jogger and even pajama pants. They could wear a hat in class which could hardly be allowed in my previous classrooms in Vietnam. I looked at myself and realized "Oh well.. I might dress up too much!". The appearance of the professor was different and made me feel surprised as well. Hardly could I have realized my American professors if I met them on the campus since they wore informally in slogan printed t-shirt, colorful pants and active sneakers while in Vietnam, the professors normally showed in a collared shirt, formal suit, and accompanied with a leather briefcase. I was still impressed with my professor who taught me in the first class of the semester. She shown up in a blue pull shirt, a beige midi skater skirt, pink legging and brown leather boots which made her look full of color.

I noticed that my classmates sat so comfortably, some even crossed their hands and put the leg on the table. I was equally surprised to see some of them bringing meals to eat or chewing gum in class. "Wow! If they were in Vietnamese classroom, they would be expelled from class!" – I thought. In Vietnamese culture, these behaviors are not acceptable in the classroom because they indicate disrespect for teachers, but here in the United States, nobody in class seemed to be bothered by them. The class continued, I remained speechless. The flow of discussion went so fast; I could not understand the others' ideas. Coming from the culture which values been easily judged, I was also worried if I made insane mistakes or asking a low level of questions. By the end of the class, I was exhausted and began to worry about the rest of the semester. I completely remember my feeling when I step out of the classroom, walking back to my apartment. I felt like I was a strange person, I was different from everyone: my appearance, my accent, my race. I was alone, and I did not belong there. Evidently, I could feel the "honeymoon" stage has passed.

Here come the waves

After the first awkward and unpropitious class, the more classes I took, the more disoriented I felt. I was more used to the straight-row class arrangement, which is considered typical and traditional in educational settings in Vietnam. Since the teacher was considered the primary focus in the large classroom with over 50 students in each class, the straight-row arrangement was predominating. In contrast, almost all of my class in American institution was arranged in semicircle or horseshoe setting. It encourages discussion and engagement between students and instructors (Harvey & Kenyon, 2013). However, these classroom layouts made me feel really uncomfortable at first. Whenever I spoke, I could felt everyone staring at me. I felt all of my activities in class could be noticed by my professor and classmates.

In my American classrooms, as the class format was normally class discussion and student facilitation. Participation is a significant measure of students' overall academic performance and comprises remarkable portion of the grade .Participation means I need to be not only physically but also mentally present in class. My professors expected students to participate by reading the assigned materials, researching about the topic and contributing to class discussions. Because American classroom is collaborative in that students co-learn through discussion and interaction (Liu, 2001), so the preparation of course materials and contribution of insights are highly evaluated in class. In Vietnamese classrooms, participation is normally assessed by roll-call. Since the number of students in Vietnamese classroom is higher and the time for each class is limited around 45 – 55 minutes, it is hardly possible for all of students to speak and share their ideas. In my previous experience in Vietnamese classroom, I only spoke up when my teachers and professors asked questions and allowed me to speak. Whenever I wanted to speak in American classroom, there would be a process operating in my mind. I had to listen to the discussion, translating into my language to understand. At the same time, I had to go online researching if it was an unfamiliar topic to me. And then when I figured out the answer, I need to find the way to express the ideas in English clearly and understandably. The whole process was frustrated at first. Sometimes, I also felt overwhelmed by the outspokenness of my classmates. As the Western education has tendency to promote learner autonomy and focusing on student-centered learning style (Liu, 2001), American students are encouraged to freely raise their voices in class. I observed in class discussion, my classmates could jump into the discussion without professor's allowance. One time, when our class discussed about ethics in advertising, my classmates mentioned the example of cruelty-free makeup products and then, other girls in class keep enthusiastically taking about makeup industry, makeup products, and gradually shifting to discuss about protecting animals

project which led to the discussion of non-profit organizations. It happened in American classroom that the topics were frequently shifted and even sometimes out of track, therefore, it could be harder for international students like me to keep pace with and participate in the discussion. The background from my collectivism and social-based culture was also a constraint to me to participate in class. Asian students in American classrooms tend to avoid arguing and prefer harmony towards communication in class (Liu, 2001). Silence was a strategy for me to avoid conflicts in discussion and is also a face-saving strategy. Due to limited linguistic abilities, different educational backgrounds, and unfamiliarity with the subject matter under discussion I was afraid I would say something wrong and low-level. Asian care about how people think about us, we prefer constructing good public faces. For most of the time in class, I was quiet and shy, I enjoyed listening and observing my classmates and professors rather than speaking up.

Class facilitation was also a new format that I had to get used to in my American classroom. I remembered my first class-facilitation as an individual was in my Seminar in Public Relations course. I was assigned two readings and based on that to ask questions, create conversation and discussion the topics in the readings with my classmates. I was literally anxious about this since normally, I was the one rarely talking in class and now I had to lead a discussion! I kept coming to see my professor to ask if it was fine when I asked this question or that question. I also prepared the answers for all of my question just in case nobody in class responded and if that happened my facilitation would be a disaster. Clearly, classroom format in the new settings at my American institution was completely different from my previous learning experience back home. It was extremely struggling and stressful for me.

In class, the pedagogical approach and class content also made me feel overwhelmed, and sometimes, disheartened. Different from the study method that I was used to, at graduate level, I

studied almost everything by myself and the lecturers were there to guide rather than explain in details the whole lecture. In American classroom, students comprehensively discussed politics, sexuality, homosexuality, religion, racist and so on, which were sensitive topics that we often avoided mentioned in class in Vietnam. My different belief and background from my original country socially constructed my perceptions of reality that the way I saw the world was simple and somehow, peaceful. It made me struggling when it came to unfamiliar and more sophisticated topics. I remembered in one class, my classmates discussed The September 11 attacks. Obviously, I knew it was a serious terrorist attack in the United States but in fact, that was all I knew. Another time, I took a feminism class in which for the first time, I approach those concepts such as queer rhetoric, sexual contract, transgender, cultural feminism, post-structuralism and so on. I spent days reading for this class materials and still wondering what I was reading because I hardly understood them. Almost all the ideology and concept were all extremely complex and sophisticated.

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Besides the obstacles in learning style, I also experienced the difficulties in negotiating my identity in American classroom. Identity refer to "individual's multifaceted identities of cultural, ethnic, religious, social class, gender, sexual orientation, professional, family/relational role, and personal image(s) based on self-reflection and other categorization social construction processes" (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p.419). Immerging into a new cultural and social context, my identities and self-images constructed by my original backgrounds has started to change. As I was the only Asian and Vietnamese student in my classroom, I realized how hard and uncomfortable it is to become a minority in society. When I was living in my home country, I rarely aware of my racial identity, but in American classroom, I confronted racial stereotype as I am an Asian student. I normally received reactions from my classmates such as "Oh! You're from Vietnam so you speak Chinese

right?" or "I also have a Japanese friend. I love you guys' culture!". In a media class, when the professors showed a photo about Vietnam war and asking about what happened, everyone's eyes were on me as they probably thought I know the answer because I am Vietnamese. That made me realized coming to American classroom, I also needed to perform my racial and national identity.

My limited language capacity in English and shy behaviors in class also led to other's assumptions and sometimes, perhaps discrimination. My peers normally gave me the easier part when we have teamwork assignments. When we assigned the articles for facilitation, my partner told me she could take the first two articles because they were longer and more complicated and I could do the rest. Another time, one classmate aggressively argued since my question and her question were almost the same but why the group chose mine. In another class, when the professors returned the assignment paper after grading, he announced that the results were not good as expected and the C was dominated. Receiving my paper, I just silently put it in my bag. A girl came to me and said "Don't be worry, Tram. It's just a paper. Even we have the bad grade sometimes". By "we", I think she may refer to "American students". I just smiled and said "Thank you" rather than letting her know I got an A- since I worked really hard for this. At the end of the day, even I always tried to think positive, I still felt upset, not because of my classmates' interactions but I was upset of myself. I used to be a brilliant, active and confident student when I was in Vietnam. But in the new classroom context, I see myself as a shy, quiet, insecure and vulnerable student. A study by Liu (2001) examined Asian students learning pattern in American classroom also found that all participators experienced some levels of identity loss: identity loss and deprivation with regard to values, status, profession, friends, and possessions; identity strain as a result of the effort required to make a necessarily psychological adaptation; identity rejection by members of the new culture; identity confusion, especially in regard to role ambiguity and

unpredictability; and identity importance as a result of not being able to cope with the new environment. I felt like I was a child and sometimes, I felt isolated and disappointed about myself in the graduate-level class. Rarely could I find my own voice and identity in class. All of the differences between the sociocultural, language, and pedagogical approach in Asian and those in America made me feel uncomfortable and stressful.

The adaptive cultural transformation also brought me into the state of stress which manifested in varying levels of anxiety and depression which were triggered by various pressures and expectations (Kim, 2012). Being alone in a country which is thousand miles away from your home, speaking a different language and living a different lifestyle is obviously stressful and struggling. The first pressure came from the heavy workload in graduate school. I had to get used to reading numerous academic articles and textbooks, conducting field researches and writing academic papers in English which is not my native one. The academic background in economics additionally challenged me in learning about humanity area. Stress that resulted from expectation was also placed on me. It was the expectation from my parents who sacrifice their life so that I could access to the better education and further, get a successful life. This pressure also came from financial problems when I had to maintain the appropriate great point average for the scholarship. There was a moment that I felt so overwhelmed and depressed confronting all these problems by myself. There was day that I even could not want to go to class. I just wanted to go straight to the airport, taking the earliest flight back home.

Life-jacket

It was not until the second semester that I witnessed a significant change in my attitude towards studying in a new environment. After one class, a professor from Nigeria came to see me and asking about how I was doing in her class. I said I was doing fine. And she smiled and started

sharing with me her story- a really inspiring and emotional story of an African girl coming to the States to pursue higher education and becoming a professor in American institution. Then she gave me a hug and suddenly, I started crying and admitted that I was terribly struggling. For the first time, I was crying because of studying. Studying used to be my joy and my interest. It is absolutely not a thing to be upset at. I remembered back in time how hard I worked and how fortunate I was to have a chance to study abroad. After that night, I realized my situation was worse than I thought. It was the moment I realized I needed to accept my vulnerability, and it was about time for me to confront the imperfection of myself and make a change

I tried to compare my own classroom experiences in Vietnam with those in America, and I started to rethink things and learn to understand, respect, and appreciate the differences. I witnessed the humorous stage in which people gradually "learn to laugh at their cultural faux pas and start to realize that there are pros and cons in each culture" (Ting-Toomey,1999). It was important for me to remember that each culture had its own values, "learn to laugh at cultural faux pas" (Ting-Toomey,1999) did not mean that I should have negative attitude towards my original culture. My previous Asian education has emphasized the vital role of academic learning as the priority responsibility and encouraged hard work as virtue. However, the Confucian values in Asian education which highlighted the hierarchy in education had invisibly strengthened the gap between the teacher and the student and contributed to my shy, silent and passive participation in American classroom where the independence and autonomy discourses were stimulated. Asian traditional values consider a teacher not merely as an instructor but someone far greater, requiring obedience and respect, so that students always address their teacher by his or her honorific title and are not encouraged to ask provocative questions which might not corroborate the teacher's dominant social status (Liu, 2001). On the other hand, the openness in American encourages the

interaction between the instructor and students, narrow the gap between teachers and students. Considering that the positive graduate school experience is significantly influenced by advisor support and a sense of belonging (Curtin et al., 2013, p. 111), I found that academic advisor and professors was one of the most important sources of support in international students' adjustment process. I felt extremely fortunate that all of my professors in American classrooms were so friendly, helpful and committed. Whenever I came to share my difficulties not only in academic but also in social life, my professors always gave me useful advice and motivated me a lot. Obviously, I found it was much easier to adapt in some particular class in which the professors had previous working experiences with international students. One of my professors usually came to class with lecture outlines so students could keep pace with the classroom content. She often spelled or write down the academic terms which could be confusing to international students. Another professor normally stopped between lecturing and asked the class "Do you guys have any questions?" or "Everything is good before we move on to the next topic?". As a student who were afraid of jumping on the discussion and asking, these were the chance for me to elicit the answers which I was wondering. Clearly, each professor had distinguished pedagogical methods to encourage the participation and adaptation of international students. Their support and motivation played an important role in my cross-cultural adaptation in the new classroom context. They made me felt like the presence of international students was paid attention and created a sense of belonging for minor international students in a white-dominant classroom setting.

Regarding to the relationship with my classmates, I did not find it was too challenging to make friends in class, however, I perceived the difference in term of friendship in America and in Vietnam culture. Friendships in the American culture play a more social and casual role, which is different from the more long-term oriented friendships based on sincerity and spirituality in the

Asian culture. American are more open and receptive to contact with strangers and tend to have many friends of low intimacy (Chen, 2008). This finding was congruent with my experience in my American classroom. I found my American classmates are friendly and there were not many barriers to start a conversation with them. They were also useful and willing to help me overcome difficulties in academic learning. Friendships with host country people can also provide international students with opportunities to learn more about the culture and develop social skills (Chen, 2008). However, the relationships were often limited within the classroom context rather than developing outside the class. I tend to deeply connected and maintain more intimate relationship with other international students in my class. Studies also showed that international students are more successful in developing intercultural friendships with other international students (Poteet & Gomez, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). We shared the same interests, confronted the similar challenged and more empathy to each others' circumstance.

Besides the support from my professors and classmate, the positive internal changing also influenced the way I adjusted to American classroom. Experiential and reflective learning have become one of my effective tools gain intercultural perspectives and comprehensive understanding about the society I am living in. The more I have been exposed to the host culture, the more I recognized and be mindful about cultural differences in study, language, cultural adjustment, and relationship with others. No longer did I restrict myself within my secure space; I spent more time participating in social activities; attending workshops and campus fair and traveling. These were the chances for me to interact and communicate with different people in different places. Not only did I improve my English capacity but I also acquired more practical knowledge about American culture and society which I could apply into my learning in class. One time in documentary and mass media class, we discussed about a documentary of a Jazz artist. Clearly, it is not a popular

music in my culture, however, I remembered my time visiting New Orleans, sitting in a corner of Frenchman street, enjoying those lovely jazzy melodies and talking to a Jazz artist performing there and connected my experiences to the topic we discussed in class. The experience made me feel more familiar and I could reflect my own knowledge to contribute to class discussion.

Keep on sailing

It was the middle of my third semester and my adaptation seemed to be going smoothly. In American classroom, I tried to become a "normal" student. I wore simple clothes like jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers to class. I was still struggling with the heavy workload of academic readings, research papers, group discussions, and presentations but in the same time, I was acquiring various valuable and interesting knowledge from my professors and my classmates coming from different cultures as well as from the lesson, through observation and participation. Step by step, I learned, practiced and performed typical and proper etiquette in the classroom. I learned from simple and detail behaviors and interactions such as saying "Bless you!" when somebody sneezes or greeting people by saying "Hey! How are you?". I learned to perform eye-contact and body language when communicate with others. Before, I was rarely the one take the imitative to start a conversation with my classmates but gradually I felt more comfortable to talk with them and naturally performed classroom etiquettes.

Gradually, I could keep pace with the class tempo in the majority of the classes. Obviously, I could not acquire all the contend that we discussed in class, however, I no longer felt ashamed to admit what I did not know. I used to try so hard in order to pretend and prove I was doing fine in class but now I learned to accept my imperfection. I spent more time after class to see my professors to ask for the areas that I missed or not understood. I came to my classmates to ask for revisions and mentoring for my projects. I was encouraged to express my own perspectives. I felt

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more confident talking in front of the class without prepared notes. I was surprised at myself because at the end of the semester, I could raise my voice and discussed about the topic that I was not used to talk about before like racism, feminism or politics. I also surprised that I could argued with my classmates in proper manner. Before, I always tried to avoid expressing opposing opinions against my classmates but then I realized everyone had our own perspectives and experiences towards a similar topic and every insight was equally appreciated. I learned how to express my statements persuasively and learned how to build a strong argument based on a logical and appropriated resources. Graduate school was still struggling and challenging, however, I regained the joy and happy to study with the enormous support and motivation from my professors and classmates.

As I mentioned before, I came from Vietnam where educational system was heavily oriented by Confucian values and norms, my learning behaviors were socially constructed and influenced as well. I still maintained a polite posture in class as I believe it was the way to show the respect to my professors and my classmates. Rarely did I show up in class in shorts or tank tops. I never eat meals or chew gums during the lectures even I knew I might not be judged by these behaviors. I am feeling more comfortable with an instructive lecture, and paying more attention to complete the product of learning such as paper or exam grade. I still spent hours standing in front of the mirror and practicing when I had class presentation or class facilitation. I tried to balance my origin cultural backgrounds and the new cultural environment. I was enthusiastic talking about my native culture, tradition, and cuisine among my American and international friends since I considered myself a cultural informant. I also tried to connect and integrate the diverse and distinguished factors in Vietnamese history, culture, and society in my presentations and discussions in class when I had a chance. I used to hate being the only

Vietnamese student as well as the only Asian student in my graduate program since my appearances, my accent and my culture were different from the rest of the class. But since I tried to showcase some aspects in my cultural backgrounds during a class discussion, they were welcomed and encouraged and I realized rather than hating myself for being different, I had better embrace the differences to make myself unique and actively contribute to the diversity in classroom context.

I also spend more time interacting with American friends and joining other activities within American community outside the classroom context. While Asian students tend to communicate and cooperate with same racial and national groups (Liu, 2001), I found the more I communicate with the host culture in social life, the more practical knowledge I learned. I went to football game, volunteer for a local charity or started working on campus. Every events brought me the chances to improve my linguistic ability, to observe people and be more open to the host culture, to keep me updated to what happened within the society that I was adjusting to. These practical knowledge and experiences played an important role in my cross-cultural process in the new environment.

Although adaptive cultural transformation was a continuous process, I gradually feel more secure and supported in the effort to participate in both classroom context and daily life. Overall, this adaptive cultural transformation process in the specific context of American classroom literally brings a significant change to me. The American pedagogy approaches help me perceive things under various angles, thinking in a more critical way and respecting the differences. The experiences in American classroom took me out of my comfort zone and gradually, I become more mature, humble and more responsible for my own life.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Findings

RQ.1: What experiences do a Vietnamese student encountered in adapting to American culture and to American classroom context in particular?

For expatriates in general and international students in particular, who come from countries that share little cultural proximity with the host country, it would not be so easy to make sense of their circumstances and make adaptation to the unfamiliar environment. No matter what kind of acculturation strategies they choose to adopt; most people may strive to adjust well to the host culture to eventually have positive outcomes and experiences in their lives. While the cultural boundaries are becoming blurred with the globalization of societies, cultural understanding for variety still remains difficult (Lineberry, 2012). Much of previous research on sojourners pay attention to the cross-cultural adaptation process within a host country, and U-Curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955) has been the one most commonly adopted to gain a better understanding of their adjustment experience (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Usunier, 1998). The model assumes people when entering a new culture undergo four stages of adjustment: the honeymoon stage with a feeling of excitement and joy, which is followed by hostility stage full of frustration while facing challenges on their daily basis, and then the adjustment stage in which people gradually adjust themselves to the host country and its associated norms and values, which makes them end up being able to effectively function in the host culture.

Using the U-Curve model to reflex my experience as a Vietnamese graduate student in the American classroom, I found that the model fits with my experiences at the beginnings but could not represent my whole cross-cultural adaptation process. I witnessed all the stages in the U-Curve model when adapting to the American classroom: the honeymoon when I felt excited and highly

expected that I would have wonderful experience in the American classroom; the hostility when I felt uncomfortable, stressful and struggling due to the cultural differences; the adjusting when I started negotiating my identity, changing my behaviors and gradually integrated with the host culture. However, my cross-cultural adaption did not occur step by step as in the model. The adjustment is a back-and-forth process which comprises a complex set of experiences influenced in various ways by different internal and external factors. Internal factors include my language ability, my cultural knowledge, my previous experience, religion, etc.… External factors include Vietnamese and American cultural difference, my study program, support from professors and classmates, etc.… These factors impacted my adaptation in various ways, explaining why in a particular period I felt easier to participate while at different time, I felt more struggling to adapt to the classroom environment. Even when I get used to the tempo and the learning style in the American classroom and my English ability has been improved, sometimes, I still was challenged by new concepts and new knowledge. Overall, I think my cross-cultural adaptation in the American classroom context is a complex, fluctuated process. It has been not only a valuable learning opportunity but also a unique and meaningful life experience to me.

In the process of adaptation in the host society, international students like me also experienced a gradual personal identity transformation—a subtle and largely unconscious change that leads to increasingly intercultural personhood (Kim, 2008). Kim (2008) stated "Although our old identity can never be completely replaced by a new one, it can be transformed into something that will always contain some of the old and the new side by side, to form a new perspective that allows more openness and acceptance of differences in people, a capacity to participate in the depth of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional experience of others" (p.362). In the classroom context, I still keep the politeness, obedience, and diligence which had been formed from my

hierarchy, rigorous and formal Asian educational backgrounds. On the other hand, American education teaches me to think critically, to respect the differences and believe in myself. In order to adapt to the new classroom setting, I had to step out of my comfort zone and were challenged to step into a domain that reached beyond my original cultural limitations. These challenges and experiences gradually transformed me into a humbler, more responsible and self-conscious person.

RQ.2: What challenges exist for Vietnamese student during the cross-culture adaptation to the American classroom and how Vietnamese student overcome these challenges?

As I came to America to pursue higher education, I realized the differences between education level of college and graduate school were the first challenges to my adaptation in the United States. I used to think graduate school is basically an overgrown version of undergraduate education. The truth is there were several differences between life as a college student and life as a grad student. It felt like you were moving from theory to real-world applications. Whereas undergraduate is about gaining a broad understanding of a topic, graduate school is a much deeper dive into the intricacies of the field, therefore, graduate school is more intense and the requirements for each class are extremely higher. I had to face with the heavy workload of reading materials, research paper, presentation and group projects. I was expected to thoroughly prepare, speak up and participate in the intellectual conversation in class discussion and facilitation. At graduate level, there were virtually no lecture lessons, the classes themselves were more self-directed and required students to be more independent. While in high school and undergraduate level, I was guided step-by-step and was taught to follow teachers' instructions; at graduate level, I spent most of the time study and research independently. The difference at social life in undergraduate and graduate school also limited my chances to interact and adapt to the new environment. When I was in college, I was highly encouraged the engage with the life of campus by joining various student's

clubs and organizations. Graduate student organizations do exist, but typically they meet less frequently and tend to focus more on academic area than typical undergraduate social clubs. There is no doubt that for me, graduate school as my new educational setting was totally different from my previous educational experience. It was genuinely hard and challenging. I had to confront with the feelings of overwhelm and ineptitude, and sometimes self-doubt and uncertainty.

Furthermore, as an international student coming from Vietnam - a Confucian heritage culture to the American university, I brought with myself a different cultural and linguistic background, learning strategies, prior educational experiences, and different assumptions and expectations to the classroom, which made me encounter additional difficulties in adjusting myself to the new educational context in the host culture. Language barriers are normally considered to be the major challenge that international students face in both academic and social settings (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). While it is accurate, however, I think language is just a factor of a fundamental challenge for international students in the cross-cultural adaptation which is the cultural difference. I spent years studying for a qualified English exam like IELTS and TOFEL. I was taught to write an appropriate essay or a research analysis paper but no one taught me how to respond when a friend asks "Hey! What's up!" or "How have you been?". I used to think they really cared and were interested in knowing about my life. But then gradually, I realized it just a normal greeting behavior of American people. This instance and other situations that I confronted during the time studying in American classrooms showed that the differences between Asian and American culture is the intensive challenge to international students in the adapting process. The cultural differences between Vietnamese culture and American culture significantly influence the learning behaviors, pedagogical methods, program contend and relationships in the educational settings.

Vietnamese education is also heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy which emphasized the hierarchy between teacher and students. Vietnamese classrooms is dominantly teacher-centered wherein the teacher is in full control of the entirety of the lesson and classroom. In its simplest meaning, the teacher talks and students listen and follow. Therefore, we were taught to learn by heart the knowledge that the teachers deposited without doubts. Vietnamese student is also familiar with the rote learning style in which classroom is more concentrate on theory and lack of practicing. While American classrooms apply a student-centered learning approach in which students play an active role in their learning. Teachers provide brief outline, encourage students to be independent learners. Therefore, when Vietnamese student participate in American education, there is a challenge for Vietnamese student to overcome the traditional and familiar learning style, in order to adapt to new pedagogical method. In my experience in American classrooms, I was struggling to express personal perspectives and participate in class discussions. As the Confucian values orient people towards harmony and face-saving strategy, I was afraid to argue with my classmates and remained silence in many classes. It took quite a long time and numerous efforts for me to get used to the new learning style.

I also found it was challenging to make a balance between my Asian cultural background and the American cultural environment I live in and between my identity in Vietnamese communities and in American communities. On one hand, I was excited to adapt myself to the American culture in order to acquire new cultural experiences so I could understand, appreciate and adapt to this culture. On the other hand, the Asian beliefs, values, customs, and habits that I learned in my Vietnamese society which was important in my cultural journey but sometimes, could probably restrict my ability to immerse in a new culture. In the context of a classroom, I tried to become a "normal" American student but at the same time, I still wanted to keep my

Vietnamese values which constructed my different identity. As a Vietnamese student with distinguished backgrounds, I was forced to realize the difference, negotiated my identity and behaviors and adjust myself to the host culture in order to effectively functioned in the new environment.

Recommendations

Cross-cultural adaptation is conceived as a process of dynamic unfolding of the natural human tendency to struggle for an internal balance when confronting adversarial environmental conditions (Kim, 2008). In order to adapt successfully, we would need to concentrate on acquiring new cultural communication practices and be willing to put aside some of the old ones. To become competent in the host communication system, in turn, requires active participation in the interpersonal level. Communication, therefore, becomes the main key to adapt to the new environment. In order to improve the improve intercultural communication competent, it is important to Asian students to aware and understand the similarities and differences between the Western culture and our home culture in terms of beliefs, values, customs, and conventions. To be successful in a new environment, we should be willing to acquire adaptive cultural transformation competence. We need to skillfully negotiate our personal and social identities. Especially in the classroom context, Asian students should actively participate by acquiring culture-sensitive knowledge through keen observation, mindful reflection, and constant practice; and by gaining communicative competence through real communication and interaction. I used to be shy and afraid to speak in class because I thought I might be judged by my foreign accent, by asking low-level questions. But it was not until I really communicated in class that I realized it was not that

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scary. In fact, they were the chances for me to deeply acquire knowledge and adjust myself to the new environment. Therefore, I believe active classroom participation should be encouraged in the target culture. It can be self-taught through observation and trial and error. Asian students should be motivated to bring questions to class and to learn to ask them in class. We should be open-minded and feel free to express different ideas and opinions. For Asian students, adapting in American society in general and in classroom context in specific is not simple since there are always cultural conflicts existing as a result of misunderstanding, stereotypes, and prejudice. There are always emotional ups and downs, uncertainty, stress, and loneliness happening. For me, the solution is to keep being humble and positive, cultivating curiosity and interest in immediate surroundings and look at problems from as many perspectives as possible. Keeping a journal is also a good means of self-reflection and introspective interaction. Many Asian students in the United States tend to develop a supportive ethnic-based friendship network to ease into the new setting, but some tend to rely too much on in-group support without seeking outside help. I think we should venture out of our own communities to make friends with people from the host culture and to participate in many social activities with American friends, such as traveling; joining sports, art or music events. Social activities beyond the classroom are of crucial importance in Asian students' cross-cultural adaptation in American environment because these activities could create many opportunities to improve communicative capability, to understand and respect the host culture and feel emotionally part of it. For me, exposure to and interaction with culturally diverse others provided a foundation for the development of intercultural sensitivity, the ability to experience and comprehend differences among cultures in more complex ways.

American institutions and educators also play an important role in the success of international students' adaptation to the host culture. Cross-cultural adaptation is a new and

complicated experience for most international students. It is necessary to American college and university to assist international students not only with academic procedures and immigration matters but also to take on the responsibility of providing professional psychological counseling and advising on cross-cultural adaptation. Various academic departments and student support units across campus can be involved in the provision of English language training, academic advising, psychological counseling, programs on cross-cultural adaptation, community service, and social and cultural events in order to support international students adapt to new environment. A critical part of developing a diverse and sustainable support structure is seeking input from faculty and staff with relevant expertise in language training, multicultural pedagogy, cross-cultural psychology and counseling, and international education.

Limitations

Like any research endeavor, this study has limitations, which can and should be addressed through further inquiry. As mentioned before, I fully acknowledge that the accounts of my experiences as a Vietnamese graduate student in American classroom will not exactly reflect the experiences of other international students in America. This is especially true considering individuals from a different culture undergo a different degree of adaptive change over time (Chung, 2015). My lack of experiences at higher education in Vietnamese context also is a limitation to this study. As I used my previous learning experiences as an undergrad student in Vietnam to compare to higher education in America, therefore, the amount of experience could not generalize the whole the cultural differences, challenges and the adaptation process that possibly occurs to Vietnamese students at graduate school in America. However, I still feel hope my personal narratives on my experience will hopefully reveal some interesting aspects of the

process as well as influent factors to the adaptive cultural transformation in a specific educational context

Additionally, I used autoethnography as research method so that there was a lack of differing viewpoints pertaining to the subject matter within this study and this is not necessarily the best option in order to make such generalized claims. And finally, the study is limited to the specific classroom context. Considering cross-cultural adaptation is a sociological phenomenon, the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in America should be further examined in a broader context of society.

Further research

Traditional studies of cultural adaptation have also assumed that individuals from different cultures desired to assimilate into the host culture, and therefore, investigated variables encouraging or discouraging the adaptation process in helping to facilitate the individuals' assimilation into the new environment. However, re-examining the U-Curves model (Lysgaard, 1995), I found that it is hardly possible to generalizable assimilation patterns of adaption that could apply for every human being. Cross-cultural adaptation is an ongoing process and peoples' perceptions and approaches to adjustment change over time as their motivation and focus of life shift. Therefore, I believe much could be learned from a longitudinal examination of their experiences and perceptions over a period of time and across contexts to have a broaden picture and a systemic insight into what happens over time when someone crosses cultural boundaries and what factors facilitate or impede his or her adaptation to the host culture.

The study emphasized the very engine driving the cross-cultural adaptation process is an active and continuous communicative engagement with a new and unfamiliar environment. Should we choose to become successfully adapted, we will benefit from being prepared and willing to

face the stressful experiences that are unavoidable parts of the adaptation process. International students need to concentrate on acquiring new cultural communication practices and putting aside some of the old ones, recognizing that host communication competence is the fundamental mechanism driving the adaptation process. Therefore, I think it is important to further examine this significant role and impact of intercultural communication competences in the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

The findings from this study could also serve as a platform for examining identity transformation and identity negotiation during the cross-cultural adaptation. In order to successfully adapt in the host society, international students experience a gradual personal identity transformation—a subtle and largely unconscious change that leads to an increasingly intercultural personhood. Of significance in this process is the development of a perceptual and emotional maturity and a deepened understanding of human conditions. Although our old identity can never be completely replaced by a new one, it can be transformed into something that will always contain some of the old and the new side by side, to form a new perspective that allows more openness and acceptance of differences in people, a capacity to participate in the depth of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional experience of others. How international student negotiate and transform their identities to be fit in the new environment plays an important role in the level and success of the cross-cultural adaptation.

Forward thoughts

Clearly, living as an expatriate in the context of a diverse society not only broadens my perspective and my knowledge of the other country as well as of my home country, but it also brought me a growing sense of agency. If I had not been here in the host country, I would find it difficult to see a sense of agency through a wider lens of cultural awareness. Despite the persistence

of some Confucian values in my cross-cultural adjustment process, living apart from my home country and family provided me with an opportunity to have more control of my own life and become more culturally flexible and diverse.

Using narrative inquiry as a methodology of my research, I became more familiar with storytelling skills. Every day, we live with our stories, retell and create new stories that we also live. Developing my understanding of the nature of narrative I found how important stories are to our lives. That was the time I realized people might not recall what their experiences of life were but they could retell every moment of their experiences in the form of a story that captured the experience. For me, writing this autoethnography was such an interesting and fascinating experience since I could apply my academic knowledge to scientifically explain my social behaviors and connect my personal narratives to wider social and cultural understanding. Putting myself as the researcher at the center of the study gave me the chances to understand myself and others more deeply. It was about the need to be introspective about feelings and motives, to be self-questioning, and prepared to confront contradictions. There was a moment I was confused and wondered should I continue writing this autoethnography. Looking back at two years studying abroad, I realized the insecure and vulnerable aspect in myself – the aspect that I was hardly aware and rarely shared with people around me before. My friends, my relatives, and even my family probably thought about my studying abroad in America as living a privileged and happy life in dreamland. Through the stories I normally told on my social media, people saw me traveling, meeting pleasant people and enjoying better things. While I felt fortunate for these opportunities, there were hidden stories about my struggling, my sadness, and depression that people would not know. Sharing and committing this fragile aspect of myself was uncomfortable at first, but then I

realized I survived through these challenges and obstacles and became more grown up and self-conscious than ever before. Writing this autoethnography is truly a relief experience for me.

Although the stories for my thesis are about to end, my journey of cultural adaptation will be ongoing. It feels obvious that I would go through a geographic, economic, emotional, and social change of life when going back to Vietnam. I have been far away from home and thus would repeat the similar cross-cultural predicaments feeling isolated and frustrated in the resettlement environment. I would face another difficulty as moving out of being an international graduate student and into the professional arena back home. However, I think cross-cultural adaptation is a journey which compels us to make choices and to be accountable for the outcomes. Those who have successfully crossed cultural boundaries are likely to be those who choose to adapt and to be changed by that choice. Although anxiety and stress can be staggering, we could work through the setbacks and come out better with an increased capacity to see ourselves and others and situations in a fresh new perspective. The personal achievements are the capacity to face challenges, learn from them, and evolve into a greater self-integration. For me, it is a way of being in the world that nurtures the primacy of individual freedom in meeting one of the singular challenges of our time, the necessity of adjusting ourselves creatively and constructively in the rapidly changing world. Therefore, my journey of cultural adaptation will keep on going and going with the desire to transform myself to be a better person.

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