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Towards Discovering New Identity: International Student's Experiences in Thailand

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Abstract

This article explores the journey of my studying abroad in Thailand that contributes to my identity changes, including personal and professional development.

Keywords: new identity, Gibbs' reflective cycle, transformation, international student's experience, Thailand

Autoethnography is a method of inquiry that allows the inner dialogue of the researcher to be considered valid, which encourages reflection (Duncan, 2004, p. 3). This method allows the researcher to critique the self and others in a social context and offers hermeneutical understanding of the societal context and a sociocultural meaning of self (Spry, 2001). It also provides a linkage between personal (the self) and contextual (the social) (Chang, 2008). Gibbs' Reflective Cycle was developed by Graham Gibbs in 1988 to provide structure to learning from experiences. It offers a framework for examining experiences, and given its cyclic nature lends itself particularly well to repeated experiences, allowing me to learn and plan from things that either went well or did not go well. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle consists of six stages, including description (of the experience), feelings (and thoughts about the experience), evaluation (of the experience, both good and bad), analysis (to make sense of the situation), conclusion (about what I learned and what I could have done differently), and action plan (for how I would deal with similar situations in the future, or general changes I might find appropriate).

Description

I was born and grew up in Cambodia. My native language is Khmer, though, English is my second language and is widely used in Cambodia. Dating back to 2010s, the idea of leaving my country for an international learning experience had never come to my mind due to the wanting of scholarships available for Cambodian students—especially in the field of finance and education. I graduated my first bachelor's degree in 2011 in Finance and Banking. After graduation, I worked as a Securities Representative and Research Analyst in one securities firm and a part-time English teacher in one language institution in Cambodia. Majority of Cambodian people study two majors simultaneously with a purpose of extending the horizon of job opportunities after graduation. I graduated my second bachelor's degree in English Literature from University of Cambodia in 2012. I thought I would just settle for a job in financial market for a couple of years before I apply for a scholarship to study abroad since the number of scholarships in finance and education fields was very limited and competitive indeed.

Competing with more than one thousand people who applied for Thai Princess scholarships is somehow stressful. I had to go through both written and face-to-face interview with six professors from Chulalongkorn University. I eventually was selected as one of the scholarship recipients to pursue my master's degree in Non-Formal Education at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. Words could not describe how elated I was when my name was announced as a scholarship recipient—that was de facto the hallmark of my transformative learning experience that was about to begin.

Because the entire program was in Thai language, prior to the starting of my master's degree program at Chulalongkorn University, I was required to study Thai language with Thai professors who have experiences teaching international students. In March 2012, I moved to Mahasarakham University to study Thai language for three months. I held on to the belief that nothing is impossible if we put our efforts towards accomplishing what we set our mind to. According to Akhtar (2008), the belief that we have in our own abilities—specifically our ability to meet the challenges ahead of us and complete a task successfully—is known as self-efficacy. I had no doubt that I could not survive there, though, the survival journey might be up and down and require tenacity and perseverance.

I readily admit that staying calm amid chaos is easier said than done. I did not know anyone at Mahasarakham University, and I found it challenging to make friends there—especially with those who do not speak languages that I am familiar with, English and Khmer. Without pretending to betray my struggle in mastering Thai language, though, I found ordering Thai foods was one of my challenging experiences. I still remember the very first day that I ordered fried egg (it is called “khai jeaw” in Thai) for dinner, and the seller said, “Khai jeaw mut lave kha,” which means we ran out of fried egg. I thought she was talking about a new menu with the fried egg on it, so I swiftly replied, “Mut lave kor dai kha,” which means I will take that run-out-of-fried-egg menu. The seller guffawed and tried to use her (broken) English to explain to me that she ran out of eggs, and she could not make fried egg for me. I could not hide my sheepish grin as I experienced such awkward moment, though, I managed to give a smile and apologize for my misunderstanding.

In June 2012, I moved to Chulalongkorn University. Saying goodbye to my favorite people in Mahasarakham was hard, but I could not wait to begin my engrossing experiences in Bangkok, Thailand. According to Kheang and Ratana-Ubol (2014), lifelong education consists of formal, non-formal, and informal education. Unfortunately, there was no linear way towards success in formal education, and I was thrown into confusion as I tried to navigate a path towards surviving in all classes that were conducted in Thai. I readily admit that being the only international student in the class was not an awesome experience, especially when there are technical words in the field that I found were all Greek to me. The journey of my first semester at Chulalongkorn University was especially difficult. For example, while I was getting more comfortable with using Thai language in informal conversation outside the classroom, I still struggled with mastering all the technical words used in formal education, especially in statistics class because every word was translated into Thai. I could barely catch up the main ideas that were explained by the professors; let alone the ability to actively participate in class discussions. This issue is not foreign to my experiences in other adult education classes.

Feelings

I felt so excited in the beginning thinking that I would have a fascinated experience that I would never have it if I decided to dwell in my comfort zone (home). While this presumption was not necessarily wrong, it was such a disorienting dilemma for me when I was sent to study Thai language at Mahasarakham University for three months, prior to my moving to Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. The university was huge and beautiful, though, I was there in summer, and there were very few people there on campus. The few people that I met, including my Thai professors did not speak English with me but Thai. I was skeptical if my professors had a broken English, so they tried to avoid speaking English to me; however, I was told that they wanted me to get used to listening and speaking in Thai. While this might make

sense to me, though, very few Thai people there could speak English, and I had a hard time making friends with my poor Thai.

I called my parents every night just to seek some motivation, though, sometimes I insisted to go back home given the fact that I felt so lonely and isolated there. I readily admit that I developed a self-doubt attitude every time I talked to strangers using my broken Thai. While this might sound like an imposter syndrome and some people even said to me that my Thai accent was cute, I was not convinced that it was a real compliment. I did not remotely enjoy a lonesome dinner, and I even hated the feeling of sitting on the bus realizing that I am a queer. I am not sure if I am using the right word here to describe my feeling of isolation, but I felt uneasy to be surrounded by people who do not speak my language. I felt uncomfortable as I tried to understand the conversations on the bus, and I could barely ask for direction when I got lost.

In June 2012, I moved to Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. While this might sound like a seamless transition, I encountered a few cultural shocks that are considered as hallmarks of my transformative experiences as an international student in Thailand. Since my entire program was in Thai, I was supposed to take classes and submit assignments as well as do presentations in Thai. While I had a good foundation of Thai language under my belt, I felt very frustrated when I realized that the use of Thai language in academia is somehow poles apart comparing to casual conversations. I had a hard time grasping essential concepts from my statistic class simply because the professor talked too fast (in Thai), and all the technical words, including standard deviation, mean and frequency, for example, were translated into Thai language as ส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน, ค่าเฉลี่ย and ความถี่. I began to feel like things were picking up speed, and I feared that it all might spiral out of control. I then kept my anxiety at bay and developed a positive self-talk so that I stepped out of my comfort zone and asked for support from professors and friends whenever I had questions about specific contents in each subject.

Evaluation

Transitioning to higher education in Thailand was one of the best decisions I have ever made, regardless of setbacks that I had encountered along the way. The journey consists of both good and bad experiences, but all of which became a great impetus for my personal and professional growth. I left no stone unturned in order to master Thai language in academia, so I eventually earned straight “A” in all my classes except the statistics one that I got a “B+.” Harkening back to when I first arrived at Chulalongkorn University, I was skeptical about my ability to even survive in each class, but my stalwart attitude towards tackling sticky patches—that life has thrown at me—enables me to rise stronger and wiser. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning implies becoming a different person. In other words, one’s identity will be changed after each learning experiences. An identity is not the whole self, it is part of the self that is manifested in various places (Marginson, 2014). Some identities within the self are more primary than others, especially those linked to family, culture, or mother tongue (Marginson, 2014).

Kouhpaenejad and Gholaminejad (2014) contend that identity is the way we understand and view ourselves in relation to the world, other, time and space. They claim that identity has both personal and social dimensions. For personal dimension, humans are considered as agents who are able to think, decide and make choices in which self might as well be activated depending on the context, place and time. For social dimension, identity reflects individuals’ relationships with the external environment, which is reconstructed through interaction with society (Kheang, 2018, 2019, 2022). I have an epiphany that I had learned sundry survival skills,

including ordering foods in Thai language, exploring places around campus using my broken Thai, and achieving good academic record in all my coursework, including adult education and research courses in Thai language. These experiences enable me to become more responsible and an independent adult learner. As a result, I became a stronger and wiser person who do not take life obstacles personally, but a steppingstone towards succeeding in adult education field. Furthermore, I learned to keep my anxiety at bay and manage to identify problems instead of jumping to the conclusion that everything just spirals out of control, and I could not do anything about it. I indeed learned how to react appropriately to various life circumstances, including tackling academic and life challenges in a foreign land and making decision on approaches that I might as well take towards accomplish a holistic learning experience in Thailand.

Analysis

Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) share an interesting quote by Heraclitus, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.” As a matter of fact, the world roils in a state of constant flux, and no amount of hard work can alter this veracity. Acknowledge the fact that everything in life is subject to change will calm down our fears and comfort our soul. I learned that it is important to practice self-reflection whenever we encounter new challenges in life. My entire experience in Thailand has shaped my identity, including my beliefs, feelings, and behaviors towards accomplishing new learning experiences in regardless of life circumstances. I have become more self-directed in the learning process, and I consider this learning experience transformative because it allows me to contemplate on how to make meaning of each challenge that I encountered, especially when I had to expose to new learning environments and interacting with new people. This deep-level learning has transformed me to become a new person who is more responsible for what I did, am doing, and will be doing so that I could improve myself—personally and professionally. Furthermore, self-reflection practice, including the practice of meaning making, helps me to understand more about who I am as an adult learner. This change of my identity can also be described in Schlossberg's transition theory. Schlossberg (1981) provides a framework for understanding human development as it occurs in response to events that trigger the need to adapt, such as losing or changing jobs or the birth of a child. Yadusky et al. (2021) emphasize that threat to identity leads to strong emotional and behavioral reactions. In order for students to succeed in post-secondary education, it is essential that they seek a way to minimize their threats to identity—this includes how to know who you are, what you are doing and why, and how to achieve what you set your mind to regardless of challenges.

Conclusion

Being an international student has sharpened my problem solving and decision-making skills, and I have become stronger and wiser after all the setbacks that I had dealt with. I consider the experience that I encountered in Thailand as a transformational learning because it resulted in the change of my identity (Kheang, 2019, 2022). I indeed have an epiphany that the practices of meditation and introspection are very helpful—besides they help calm down anxiety and self-doubts. They also allow me to have a clear mind, especially when I have to confront with a new set of problems every single day. There is no denial that we could not control how others think about us, but we could always control how we think about ourselves and the situations that happened to us. Chances are if we are in control of our thoughts and reactions, there is a possibility that we could become a winner in any learning situations.

Action Plan

This section describes what I would do differently if the challenges of adapting to new learning and living environment rose again. Long story short, I would practice positive self-talk and self-reflection daily, in addition to practicing mediation. In other words, I would practice reflective dialogue that involves listening to myself reflexively and listening to others empathetically. This will help me to start surfacing my own paradigm and assumptions and focus on unity so that I could listen from the inside subjectively.

Moreover, I would develop a new way to move out of those sticky patches that life has thrown at me by developing a generative dialogue, which means I would listen not only from within myself and/or from others, but from the whole system so that we could generate a more effective way of being, teaching and learning in this fast-changing world (Kheang, 2019).

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