

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES AMONG INTERNATIONAL
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXTS

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This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved family for their endless support and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to identify transformative learning experiences among international postgraduate students in UTM. This study was conducted to explore and understand how the international postgraduate students experience transformative learning in the classroom contexts. Learning experience that went through by the international postgraduate students would give positive impact towards teaching and learning process in public Universities in Malaysia. Meaning perspective is related to student interaction with the environment and learning styles among international postgraduate students. Transformative learning theory is the main theory used in the framework of this study, in addition to the theory of self-directed learning, socio-cultural and constructive. All four of these theories are important in understanding and exploring the perspectives of meaning and significance scheme of respondents in the context of learning in the classroom. Therefore, to explore and understand this research in depth, qualitative method which is in-depth interview (semi-structured) being used by the researcher. Phenomenological approach and case studies are also used to understand the transformative learning among postgraduate students were selected using purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of the eight respondents correctly. The results showed that participants can change the structure of meaning (meaning old structure) they are old to the new (revised new meaning structure) through information technology, in-class discussions and physical environment of the classroom. This study provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon of international students abroad. However, due to the limitations of the research, future studies related to this topic need to explore more by upcoming researchers.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengenal pasti pengalaman pembelajaran transformatif dalam kalangan pelajar pascasiswazah antarabangsa di UTM. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka dan memahami bagaimana pelajar pascasiswazah antarabangsa menjalani pembelajaran transformatif dalam konteks di bilik kuliah. Pengalaman pembelajaran di bilik kuliah yang dilalui oleh pelajar pascasiswazah antarabangsa boleh memberikan kesan yang positif terhadap pengajaran dan pembelajaran di Universiti Awam di Malaysia. Struktur makna (meaning perspective) amat berkaitan dengan interaksi pelajar dengan persekitaran dan gaya pembelajaran dalam kalangan pelajar pascasiswazah antarabangsa. Teori pembelajaran transformatif adalah teori utama yang digunakan dalam kerangka kajian ini, selain teori pembelajaran arahan sendiri, sosiobudaya dan konstruktivis. Keempat-empat teori ini penting dalam memahami dan meneroka perspektif makna dan skema makna responden dalam konteks pembelajaran di bilik kuliah. Oleh itu, untuk meneroka dan memahami kajian ini secara mendalam, kaedah kualitatif iaitu temubual mendalam separa berstruktur telah digunakan oleh penyelidik. Pendekatan fenomenologi dan kajian kes telah turut digunakan untuk memahami pembelajaran transformatif dalam kalangan pelajar pascasiswazah telah dipilih dengan menggunakan persampelan bertujuan. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk menganalisis transkrip daripada lapan responden dengan tepat. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa peserta dapat mengubah struktur makna (old meaning structure) mereka yang lama kepada yang baru (new revised meaning structure) melalui teknologi maklumat, perbincangan dalam kelas dan persekitaran fizikal bilik kuliah. Kajian ini memberikan pemahaman yang mendalam mengenai fenomena pelajar antarabangsa di luar negara. Kajian masa depan yang berkaitan dengan tajuk ini memerlukan penelitian baharu oleh penyelidik yang akan datang.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Developing countries such as our own country, Malaysia strive to attract foreign students either in public or private universities to improve the quality and cultural formation of the student body, gain prestige, and earn income. China, Malaysia, and India are developing strategies to attract students and to export educational programs and institutions (Altbach and Knight, 2007). In education, internationalization is a process which has been set in motion by globalization and describe what is going on at a national level, namely that international institutions of Higher Education (HE) are reaching towards other national institutions to reflect new commercial and political order (Montgomery, 2010). According to (Knight, 2004) ,internationalization is ‘the process of embracing the international, intercultural or global aspect into the purpose, functions or delivery of tertiary education’.

The intention of internationalization is to reinforce education criterions, enhancing science and technological innovations and fostering faster regional integration and development through quality higher education in targeted areas and it is anticipated to develop a strong higher education sector with solid, vibrant institutions engaged in fundamental and development oriented research, capacity building, teaching, community outreach and enrichment services (Jowi, 2012).

Higher education has long been concerned with the transmission of knowledge across the world and has long been involved in staff and student exchange were offered to support an understanding as part of internationalization (Dixon, 2006). Meanwhile, it is important for universities managements to understand international students' perspectives on the value they expect and receive from their higher education experience to remain in attracting talented international students (Urban and Palmer, 2013).

As such University Technology Malaysia (UTM) attracts more international students yearly with its glorious prestige as one of the most capable Universities in Malaysia. Thus, this study explores the transformative learning (TL) experience of international postgraduate students in UTM, this study is all about what trigger events happen in the classroom contexts, why disorienting dilemmas occur in the classroom contexts, what are the factors that facilitate transformative learning in the classroom among international postgraduate students and finally how do the students integrate new revised assumption into their frame of references. This study will illuminate the transformative learning process among international postgraduate students, which helps them to discover their transformative learning experience in the host country. This chapter comprises the background of the study, the research problem, research purpose, research questions, research objectives, and research scope as well as research limitations.

1.2 Background of the Study

Transformative learning theory offers a different lens to examine what is implicit, which is called as transformative learning in higher education. Since educational stakeholders are associated with efforts to bring about change in higher education, they need to raise what kind of change is required. This phenomenology study would help to enlighten how the international postgraduate students going through the TL in the host country. 'Transformation' suggests an intense change for the better; transformative learning theory explores how that change comes about. Transformative learning occurs when, through critical questioning of ourselves, our beliefs and our expectations, we experience a deep swing in perspective which leads us to a new way of being in the world (Wilcox, 2009).

Again indicated by (Wilcox, 2009) that learning process may be a answer to upsetting life experiences such as disorienting dilemma serves as a precipitating event, and is followed by gradual or sudden change, or it may be a developmental compromise of life changeovers, in which case there is a sense of being on the edge of, and moving towards, somewhat new. Through transformative learning students reexamine the ways they make sense of the world, and their revised understandings inform following decisions they make and actions they might take.

The transformative learning process is often described as cognitive and rational, but it may also incorporate imagination, intuition, affect and soul-work. It is not a solitary implementation, perhaps dialogue with others typically plays a vital role in the critical process of reviewing our long-held assumptions. Hence when individuals who have transformed their perspectives act differently in the world than they did before and share their new perspectives with other people, societal transformation can come about claims (Wilcox, 2009). Understanding in more than just an intellectual sense that there is more than one way of seeing a circumstances can be quite transformative. This can lead us to revise our beliefs about and expectations of future events (Lawrence and Cranton, 2009).

Transformative evaluation required a re-framing of reflective practice from an individual exploration of “problem-identification and modification” to one of critical collective dialogue based on narratives of practice (Cooper, 2014). These imaginative and progressive ways of seeing can lead to acceptance of other ways of sighted and this process encourages to integrate that “otherness” with own way of being. When this integration occurs, the experience is often transformative or change time to time (Lawrence and Cranton, 2009). In addition the new knowledge of local and global issues also led to changes in attitudes that revealed an informed susceptibility and new perspective toward international people, culture, and events (Hamza, 2010).

According to (Hamza, 2010) in higher education, colleges and universities are seeking ways for strengthening the teaching of global perspectives through engrossment in international academic activities. The aim is to establish a picture of the scope to which students are involved in understanding and responding to global issues. Therefore, they raise awareness among the faculty and administrators concerning the significance of the international aspect in relation to student learning and outcomes. A benefit descending from these international experiences is that they attained the ability to expressive the academic and international perspectives into their professional lives said again by (Hamza, 2010).

Therefore, higher education institutions, especially those challenged by the movement toward globalization and internationalization have the responsibility of nurturing the university’s awareness and profile (Hamza, 2010). Aligning internationalization within the wider multicultural environment of equity and diversity helps to place international students “at the heart of the university as a foundation of cultural capital and intentional diversity, enriching the learning experience both for home students and for one another, expanding staff horizons, building a more powerful learning community and thus deepening the HE experience as a whole” (Coryell, Durodoye, Wright, Pate, and Nguyen, 2010). Accordingly, academics who have international experiences can be a helpful source in providing valuable comparative

perspectives for the educational policy makers on how higher education institutions integrate global education into their curriculum and programs (Hamza, 2010).

1.3 Higher Education in Malaysia

The role of higher education in the economy is attracting growing attention in many nations across the globe. Higher education has the prospective to contribute to the economic prosperity through innovation and knowledge exchange in the wider society, and the development of new ideas, products and services from research, besides continuing to raise the education levels of citizens (Yen, Ong, and Ooi, 2015). The system of higher education that took root in the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia was transplanted from Britain to Malaysia during British colonial rule (Selvaratnam, 1985). According to (Shah, Tamam, Bolong, Adzharuddin, and Ibrahim, 2014) in Malaysian context, statistics has shown a high enrolment of international students into Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs). In fact the role of Malaysia higher education, in connection with New Economy Model (NEM) which is the plan established in education sector with the aim to transforming Malaysia towards a high-income advanced nation in March 2010 and it goes two ways: firstly, as a global commodity for trade to the country through the arrival of international students into the country, generating an estimated amount of RM 6 billion from the 200,000 international student enrolment in 2020; secondly, building the country's capacity in knowledge-led activities through increased mobility of students and faculty members and international relationships in the areas of research and development claims (Aziz and Abdullah, 2012).

The Malaysian international education sector has grown tremendously during the past decade and our nation as center of educational excellence in the region (Malaklolunthu and Selan, 2011). Besides internationalized curriculum so conceived freshmen a simple tendency toward the promotion of what they call intellectual tourism, involving the application of traditional academic knowledge and practice to new cultures

with no attention to critical self-reflection or the discourse of development (Hanson, 2008). In fact internalization leads to experiences of international students, to a greater or lesser extent, as sign of the quality of the establishment of education (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day, 2010).

1.4 Problem Statement

International students attracts by the Universities overall in Malaysia, especially in UTM because of the competitive advantage “globally” as they return to their country or manage to stick to host country because of the privilege given in Malaysia and namely UTM as a research university among five top universities in Malaysia. Even though, there are many countries that familiar with transformative learning in their education system, but then several research only has been done among international postgraduate students and just few in the classroom contexts. So far the research towards transformative learning experience among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts identifies as fresh and rarely studied, this is the gap found that need to research in this phenomenology study. In addition, transformative learning experiences among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts is not being addressed by any researchers even though there are so many research has been done in higher education, but less in the classroom contexts which create gap to be filled up in this research.

Literature review shows that past researches in transformative learning experience is more to research on social (Fang and Yusof, 2014) whereby the researcher explained about perspectives of surviving women’s learning experiences from the Tsunami in Aceh; (Wood, 2007) research about alterations in meaning schemas and comparing respondent experiences to Mezirow’s TL theory; (Carter, 2001) explored transformative learning through developmental relationships among nine midcareer women; (Duffy, 2001) the researcher critique of cultural education in nursing students to

encourage them to be alert to the different cultures and give equal services; (Unyapho, 2011) the author explored international doctoral students educational experiences; (Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson, 2007) did explored the social connectedness among international students at an Australian university; (Younes and Asay, 2003).

(Mofidi, Strauss, Pitner, and Sandler, 2003) research on the impact of international study experiences on college students; (Lindstrom, 2011) the researcher examines the lived experience of individual adult transformation in the context of travel; (Lewis, 2009) examined how transformative learning takes place in the lives of participants who are in the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) community, cultural (Gill, 2007) understand the process of students' intercultural adaptation and the approaches; (Montgomery, 2009) investigated students' views of working in international groups; (Taylor, 1994) explored how participants learn to become intercultural competent, in term of spiritual and religion (Longacre, 2009) conducted the research on how the Bible study fellowship changing women's lives through transformative learning; (Jones, 2010) done the research to the experiences of transformative learning in clinical pastoral education students and it's to view patient's grief as own.

(Hamid, Yusuff, Othman, and Balwi, 2012) the Chinese perspectives on Islam, and in higher education (Brown, 2009) explored on the transformative latent of the international student sojourn; (Thinsan, 2009) research on the previous professional backgrounds, intermediate issues, and intellectual transformation of four Afghan university teachers during their graduate study; (Duncan Grand, 2011) impact teachers' instructional practices; (Allen, 2011) conducted the research on ESL teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and understandings about the effects of their important personal, educational, and professional experiences on the development of their teacher identity; (Li, Whalley, Zhang, and Zhao, 2011) explored the major transformation of the higher education in China; (Glisczinski, 2007) the researcher explored the curricular and educational interventions in teaching; (Hashimoto, 2007) the researcher focuses on the relationship between students' backgrounds and their worldviews, and on how these worldviews were in try affected by EDUC193 learning experiences; (Zollinger, 2010)

has done research on transformative learning program in Environmental Studies Academy; (Fullerton, 2010) research on transformative learning in college students.

(Kumi Yeboah, 2012a) transformative learning experiences of international graduate students from Asian countries; (Kumi–Yeboah and James, 2014); (Conrad and Phillips, 1995) intellectual isolation has been identified by the author among postgraduate students; (Sheridan, 2011) examined the relationship between academic staff and international students in concern to developing academic at university; (McGaughy, 2011) research on elementary school teachers relationship between collaboration and transformative learning; (Pasquariello, 2009) the author explored the nature of triggering events and ensuing transformative results specifically among adult graduate students; (Jaramillo, 1996); (Dunn, 2011) professional development workshops for teachers newly graduate; (Hendershot, 2010) did a case study to transform students into global citizens; (Bukor, 2011) teachers’ transformative experiences of re-constructing and re-connecting personal and professional selves; (Gabriel, 2008) the author examined the process and outcomes of transformative learning experiences and their relationship to transformational behaviors and characteristics in a group of 19 leaders and lastly in the classroom contexts; (Ritz, 2006) in this study the researcher explore how graduate international students make meaning to new experience.

Among the researchers done on transformative learning, only two is researching on classroom contexts (Ritz, 2006) and (Kumi–Yeboah and James, 2014) has explore transformative experiences that were related with education and non-education. This research (TL) has been done in the western country, but not in Malaysia yet. Thus, this study is also significant in filling up the research gap in inquiring the transformative learning experiences among international postgraduate students in UTM.

1.5 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study to identify international postgraduate student's transformative learning experiences in UTM as the students who spending several years in the host country with different classroom approaches, cultures, classroom pedagogy, languages, norms and rules. Since the students do not belong to our country (Malaysia) they need to be exposed to the host country and at the same time they need to adjust to the new conditions and the environment as well.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- i. What trigger events that happen among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts?
- ii. Why trigger events occur among international postgraduate students the classroom contexts?
- iii. What are the factors that facilitate transformative learning among international postgraduate students in the classroom?
- iv. How do the international postgraduate students integrate new revised assumption into their frame of reference?

1.7 Research Objectives

The research questions nevertheless lead to the following set of research objectives:

- i. To explore what are the trigger events that happen among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts.
- ii. To discover why trigger events occur among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts.
- iii. To identify the factors that facilitates transformative learning among international postgraduate students in the classroom.
- iv. To discover how the international postgraduate students do integrate new revised assumption into their frame of reference.

1.8 Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, the researcher creates a framework which will guide in developing questions to assist in interviews and in eliciting data from participants. This study shall explore three aspects, namely: (1) the trigger events that happen among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts. (2) why trigger events occur among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts, (3) the factors that facilitate transformative learning experience among international postgraduate students in the classroom contexts and (4) the international postgraduate students' integration of new revised assumptions into their frame of reference.

This study exactly focuses on transformative learning experience among postgraduate students. The transformative learning experience processes are comprised of activities such as past experiences, current experiences, trigger events, revised frame of reference, and new revised frame of reference. Conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.1:



Figure 1.1 Conceptual Frameworks

1.9 Research Scope

The scopes of this study are as follows:

- i. This study aimed to explore the transformative learning experience among international postgraduate students. Through the experience of the students, the researchers can understand how the learning process of transformation occurs in students itself and how individuals build the new revised frame of reference to their new world of learning.
- ii. The study focuses on the process of transformative learning experience among international postgraduate students. It involves a process before and after of the respondents to create the new revised frame of reference. This is important because researchers can see how the learning process changes the

student's perspective and how the students integrate of new revised assumptions into their frame of reference.

- iii. The participants of this study are grouped as international postgraduate students from the Faculty of Management, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and Faculty of Bioscience and Medical Engineering (UTM) who have more than six months (one semester) of experiences studying at UTM.
- iv. The study is based on a qualitative approach to illuminate the process of transformative learning experience among international postgraduate students. Thus, the findings are truly based on real life experiences of the students and are not being manipulated by researcher's variables of interest.

1.10 Research Limitations

The limitations of this research are itemized as follows:

- i. This study is based on a phenomenology study of a selected university (UTM) in Skudai, Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Thus, the findings of this study are specific and do not represent any other universities, including the other branch of UTM in Kuala Lumpur as well.
- ii. The participants of this study consist of international postgraduate students with a majority respondents are from the master program mixed mode, one respondent from taught course and another one respondent from master program full research. However, this study has limitation for not selecting local students, undergraduate students and also from the other different University.

1.11 Research Significance

For a global perspective, this study is very significant in knowing transformative learning experience processes that going through by international students at the host institution as they spend a quarter of their life in the host country. Transformative learning experiences will give them the biggest impact once finishing their studies fewer years in abroad. At last what they have learnt from the host institution is very important in order to reveal the real experience or situation in abroad and how they are going to see the overall and ensure whether, their assumption give meaning to the frame of the reference they have been created or instead of it.

Extensive researches are carried out on transformative learning experience in Western Universities but less research has been done in Malaysian Universities so far. Higher education should be given importance to foreign students as they rely on host countries that can guide them in new learning experience in abroad. Moreover the students depending on the host country to assist them in adopting and adapting the new environment. So these studies much more to help international postgraduate students to utilize the classroom learning contexts in several ways.

1.12 Conceptual Definitions

i. Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is defined as voluntary action and people may not always purposefully set out to critically question their beliefs and values; many times transformative learning urged by an outside event and that event may be unexpected, awful, or devastating claims (Cranton, 1994). Besides that, the most important behavior changes may be functions of perspective transformation, and such transformation is often an essential precondition for meaningful behavior changes claim (Mezirow, 1978).

ii. Adult Learners

Adult learners are mature, socially responsible individuals who participate in constant informal or formal activities that assist them to acquire new knowledge, skills, or values; detailed on existing knowledge, skills, or values; analyse their basic beliefs and assumptions; or alteration the way they see some aspect of themselves or the world around them (Cranton, 1994). According to (Merriam and Bierema, 2013) adult learners are motivated by wanting to improve their situation in adult life may be in work-related situation, personal, or social-related and they are absolutely differ from a children lifecycle.

iii. Situated Learning

Learning that involved participation in the sense that there was a curriculum to be engaged, tasks to be completed and knowledge to be acquired often, though not exclusively, through interaction with others (Kirk and Kinchin, 2003). Meanwhile situated learning is a activity appeared to be anything but simple empirical attribute of everyday activity and experience-based learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

iv. Self-Directed Learning

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is a training design in which trainees' master package of predetermined material, at their own pace, without the aid of an instructor (Piskurich, 1993).

v. Classroom Contexts

The classroom is a place where the lecturers or facilitator can make their methods consistent with the classroom context by penetrating suitable ways to adapt the classroom expectations, instructional materials, and assessment techniques to the language learning objectives of their students. In addition, classroom is the place where students more confident in adapting curricula, tests, materials, small group activities, dialogues, procedures for presenting material, practicing items, and giving feedback in different classroom settings (Linnell, 2001).

vi. International Students

Ultimately, study abroad programs can provide students an opportunity to learn about global diversity and the interdependence and interrelationships of local, national, and international issues affecting the world's population today. These experiences are often significantly transforming for students and faculty alike and can be an important vehicle for attaining institutional internationalization goals (Coryell et al., 2010).

vii. Past Experiences

Past experiences considered as something that faced by a person which is can be good or bad in their life. Past experience might give particular person better or bad impact in the future if the person seeking the meaning of it.

viii. Current Experiences

Current experiences something that situation or scenario going through by a person in their current life.

1.13 Operational Definitions

i. Transformative Learning

According to (Cranton, 2006) for this study, transformative learning in the context of higher education can be defined as a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising students' perspectives of experiences in the classroom. In this research, the researcher going to examine the transformative learning experiences of the international postgraduate students and how they perceive the learning in the host country as well.

ii. Adult Learners

Adult learners who participate in classroom by involving themselves in some situation and share their experiences or believes that gained from previous classes or from their working experiences. Perhaps they might adopt and adapt new knowledge from current class activities, methodology or discussion among classmates. As well in this study most of the adult learners are from different background who are pursuing their higher education in UTM.

iii. Situated Learning

Situated learning would be formed in group discussion, group or individual presentations, assignments, debates, case study, talking circle and so on, which makes the students to interact with each other and it creates the diversity of opinion. Most of the classroom discussion will be as stated above and every student's involvement will take into the consideration and marks given according to the relevant points.

iv. Self-Directed Learning

Postgraduate students who are able to learn by themselves independently and discussing the subject matter to the other students as well. SDL helps the students to be autonomous learner without depending on instructors to guide them.

v. Classroom Contexts

Classroom which consists with students and (participants) all over are totally from different background and culture as well. The diversity of religions, nationality, believes, language and so on gathered at one place called as "classroom" in the international postgraduate students' classroom contexts.

vi. International Students

An international student is described as persons who studying in UTM, Malaysia on a temporary visa that allows for academic coursework. This may be on a short or long-term program, be led by faculty from the students' home institution or by instructors in the international setting, can be unilateral or bilateral, include a service component, and be offered within one or more fields of study.

vii. Past Experiences

Past experiences that faced by international postgraduate students in their own country or in classroom contexts. The differences between the students' previous classroom contexts and the current one.

viii. Current Experiences

Current experiences defines that international postgraduate student's current situation in the classroom.

1.14 Summary

This chapter highlights the background of this study, problem statement, research purpose, research questions, research objectives, significance of this study and its limitations. Based on the above discussions, the researcher shall explore the transformative learning experience in selected University via in-depth interviews among international postgraduate students to answer the research questions and address the problems that underlie this study. The selection of one of the government based University, specifically for this study is to fill up the gap on empirical evidence that overlook Malaysian University needs to strengthen the research on international postgraduate students' experiences when they are in the host country. As an intellect immigrant, they are giving domestic students the same experience as they are not going abroad, perhaps the domestic students can exchange the culture of foreign students as well. The subsequent chapters intend to look into the literature review and methodological approach in answering the research questions.

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