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Professional Culture of the Specialist of the Future

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: FLEXIBILITY AND
ADAPTATION ISSUES**

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Abstract

Developing professional culture of the specialist in international students is a complicated process, as international students should adjust to new university culture. This paper is a study of a group of Turkmenian students in a Russian University as they become adjusted to the culture of teaching and learning in the new learning environment during their first year of study. It focuses on Turkmenian students' adjustments, emotional, cognitive and behavioural, in order to make their learning successful and to become a good specialist in the future. The present study seeks to analyse the level of the international students' flexibility and adaptability in a new education space at the end of the first year of study. Flexibility and adaptability is understood in this study as a component of intercultural competence. The descriptors of the levels of flexibility and adjustment are taken from Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. The authors focus on the research questions: What adaptation difficulties do Turkmenian students have during their first year of study in a Russian university? What is the level of flexibility and adaptability of the Turkmenian students at the end of the first year of study from their own perspectives? The results of the questionnaire revealed that Turkmenian students possessed quite a good basic level of flexibility and adaptability, which enabled them to continue future adjustment and successful learning.

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Keywords: Adaptability, adjustment, flexibility, international students, Turkmenian students.



1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st centuries the development of globalisation processes and integration had an impact on education, which acquired a wide international dimension. Export of Russian higher education is a rapidly growing phenomenon and it has become very popular for graduates from former Soviet Republics and some other countries of the world. Due to its geographic position, Russia is closely connected with both Asian and European countries. Russia can become a kind of an educational “bridge” between different regions of the world (Lebedeva, 2017). Such phenomena as border-crossing and changing places give rise to plenty of research on the international and intercultural dimension in higher education. The academic adjustment of international students to the host culture and educational environment of the university is receiving increasing attention. Physiological, psychological, social and linguo-cultural aspects of adaptation of international students are being approached from different perspectives.

2. Problem Statement

Previous researches on international students’ adaptation and adjustment to the culture of the host university investigated differences of cultures and the benefits of study abroad in terms of personal growth and intercultural competence in general. The present study approaches flexibility and adaptability of international students from the perspective of intercultural citizenship. Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture is used as a conceptual basis for defining the essence of flexibility and adaptability of international students (Council of Europe, 2017a). The levels of this phenomenon given in RFCDC and are: basic, intermediate and advanced (Council of Europe, 2017b). The present study focuses on the personal feeling of adjustment of 20 Turkmenian students and the difficulties they faced during their first year of study in a Russian university. Obviously, during this time they could not achieve the highest level of flexibility and adaptability. In view of the controversial issues of Turkmenian and Russian cultures, the present research employs a special design to elicit the students’ own interpretation of their experience, rather than relying on researchers’ interpretation, and to shed light on their level of flexibility and adaptability to the host culture. This study is significant because it investigates the issues of international students’ adaptation and adjustment to the culture of the host university from the students’ own perspectives.

3. Research Questions

Cultural differences between Turkmenia and Russia are believed to cause difficulties for Turkmenian students in adjusting to the new culture. In addition, these difficulties may be understood as a critical factor in determining the success or failure of their study in Russia.

- 3.1. Research question 1: What adaptation difficulties did the Turkmenian students have during their first year of study in a Russian university?
- 3.2. Research question 2: What is the level of flexibility and adaptability of the Turkmenian students from their own perspectives?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is two-folded: firstly, the study is to provide a better understanding of the Turkmenian students' difficulties in adjustment to learning in a Russian university during their first year of study; secondly, the study is designed to depict the Turkmenian students' level of flexibility and adaptability from their own perspectives.

5. Research Methods

The present study of the problem of flexibility and adaptability of international students is based on linguo-cultural methodological approach (Chernyavskaya, 2016; Voevoda, 2015b; Kostikova, Prishvina, Ilyushina, Fedotova, & Belogurov, 2018). Theoretical and empirical methods of study were used in the research.

5.1. Theoretical methods of study

The theoretical methods are represented by: analysis and systematization of publications of Russian and foreign researchers on the problem of the study. The study is based on the ideas of importance of developing teacher's professionalism (Eremkina, Eremkin, Martishina, & Grebenkina, 2015; Belogurov, 2016), on the ideas of productivity-oriented learning organization in foreign language teaching (Almazova, Eremin, & Rubtsova, 2016); on the issues of professionally focused linguistic education of international students (Voevoda, 2017). The authors also advocate the issues of the meaningful and successful intercultural dialogue (Voevoda, 2015; Barrett, 2018; Wagner, Perugini, & Byram, 2017), the principles of intercultural citizenship (Byram, Golubeva, Hui, & Wagner, 2016) and education for global citizenship (Almazova, Khalyapina, & Popova, 2016); ideas of internationalisation and the development of students' intercultural competence (Lantz-Deaton, 2017).

5.2. Empirical methods of study

The empirical methods include: observation of the students' academic activity – their work during English classes (four times a week); systematization of the authors' personal practical experience of foreign language teaching at University; observation of the students' extracurricular activity – International Students Party, Days of Turkmenian Culture, etc.; informal talks and interviews; questionnaire; comparative data analysis. On the foundation of Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (2017b) a special questionnaire was developed. Quantitative data were gathered through the analysis of the scores of opinions received from questionnaires of 20 respondents, all being first-year students from Turkmenia, future teachers of History and English, studying at the Department of History and International Relations of Ryazan State University named after S. Yesenin.

The data provide the material for comparative analysis of the students' self-assessment of flexibility and adaptability levels in the context of professional culture of the future teacher of History and English. The respondents had to express their agreement or disagreement and put a tick in the necessary column, according to the key descriptors of the three levels of flexibility and adaptability – basic, intermediate and advanced (Council of Europe, 2017b).

6. Findings

The results of the present study revealed that international students from Turkmenia have considerable difficulties of adaptation to new conditions of living, culture and people especially during the first year of study.

6.1. Research question 1: What adaptation difficulties did Turkmenian students have during their first year of study in a Russian university?

The results showed that the Turkmenian students faced various problems in Russia - physiological, psychological, social, linguocultural. We interviewed 20 Turkmenian students at the end of the first year of study at the Department of History and International Relations of Ryazan State University named after S. Yesenin. All of them are going to become teachers of History and English in the future. 13 are female and 7 are male. All respondents are young people up to 23 years of age. None of the respondents had the experience of living in Russia before. The majority of the students had to overcome difficulties of the physiological adaptation at the very first months of living in Russia: 18 students (90%) admitted that it was very difficult for them to get accustomed to the weather, 14 students (70%) found it rather troublesome adjusting to living conditions at the dormitory. There were also some other difficulties: 'no relatives' responded 7 students (35%), 'Russian cuisine is very unusual' for 12 respondents (60%). Naturally, 'Russian is a very difficult language for studying at the university' consider 16 respondents (80%). The students also had some difficulties because of the language: communicating with people – 3 respondents (15%), in the bank – 2 respondents (10%), in public transport – 4 respondents (20%), in the supermarket – 3 respondents (15%). 7 respondents (35%) said that they did not have any difficulties at all. By the way, these students started learning Russian before they came to study at the university. They spoke Russian in their families. The results of the survey are presented in Figure 01.

6.2. Research question 2: What is the level of flexibility and adaptability of the Turkmenian students at the end of the first year of study from their own perspectives?

At the very beginning of the research, it was necessary to define 'flexibility', 'adaptability' and 'adjustment'. There are different definitions of these basic terms. Cambridge Dictionary defines 'flexibility' as "the ability to change or be changed easily according to the situation" and "the ability to bend or to be bent easily without breaking" (Flexibility, 2018). Another term 'adaptability' the same dictionary defines as "an ability or willingness to change in order to suit different conditions; ability or willingness to change" (Adaptability, 2018). 'To adjust' means "to change something slightly, especially to make it more correct, effective, or suitable; to become more familiar with a new situation" (Adjust, 2018).

The present study is based on the definitions given by the authors of Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture: "Flexibility and adaptability are the skills that are required to adjust one's thoughts, feelings or behaviours in a principled manner to new contexts and situations so that one can respond effectively and appropriately to their challenges, demands and opportunities. Flexibility and adaptability enable individuals to adjust positively to novelty and change and to other people's social or cultural expectations, communication styles and behaviours. They also enable individuals to adjust their patterns of thinking, feeling or behaviour in response to new situational contingencies, experiences, encounters and information" (Council of Europe, 2017a, p.49).

Thus, flexibility and adaptability include abilities or skills in adjusting to changing circumstances, reconsidering one's own opinions in the light of new evidence, controlling and regulating one's own emotions and feelings, overcoming anxieties, worries and insecurities about meeting and interacting with other people. It also means regulating and reducing negative feelings, adjusting one's behaviour in a socially appropriate way according to the prevailing cultural environment, adapting to different communication styles and behaviours (Council of Europe, 2017a).

The analysis of the students' questionnaire answers was made with special focus on the key descriptors of the three levels of empathy according to Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2017b). The data obtained show that the respondents are very optimistic and confident valuing their capacity for empathy (Table 01).

A special questionnaire was developed based on Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2017b). It includes six levels of flexibility and adaptability – Basic 1 & Basic 2, Intermediate 1 & Intermediate 2, Advanced 1 & Advanced 2. The key descriptors were modified so as the respondents could express their own understanding of themselves (Table 01).

Table 01. Flexibility and adaptability of the Turkmenian students at the end of the first year of study from their own perspectives

No	The Level of flexibility and adaptability	The key descriptors of flexibility and adaptability	Number of respondents and percentage Agree	Number of respondents and percentage Disagree	Number of respondents and percentage Don't know
1.	Basic 1	I modify my opinion if I am shown through rational argument that this is required	20 (100%)		
2.	Basic 2	I can change the decisions that I have made if the consequences of those decisions show that this is required	18 (90%)	2 (10%)	
3.	Intermediate 1	I adapt to new situations by using a new skill	17 (85%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)
4.	Intermediate 2	I adapt to new situations by applying knowledge in a different way	15 (75%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)
5.	Advanced 1	I adopt the sociocultural conventions of other cultural target groups when interacting with members of those groups	12 (60%)	6 (30%)	2 (10%)
6.	Advanced 2	I can modify my own behaviour to make it appropriate to other cultures	5 (25%)	8 (40%)	7 (35%)

The analysis of the questionnaire revealed that practically all the respondents could modify their opinion or change their decisions if it is required – 20 students (100%) and 18 students (90%) correspondingly. Surely, they possess at least the basic level of flexibility and adaptability. Not all of the respondents admitted that their level is Intermediate. And only a few of the respondents consider that they have achieved the advanced level of flexibility and adaptability. Some of them found it rather difficult to assess their skills and abilities, so they answered 'I don't know'.

The following linear diagram graphically presents the Turkmenian students' opinion of their level of flexibility and adaptability (Figure 01).

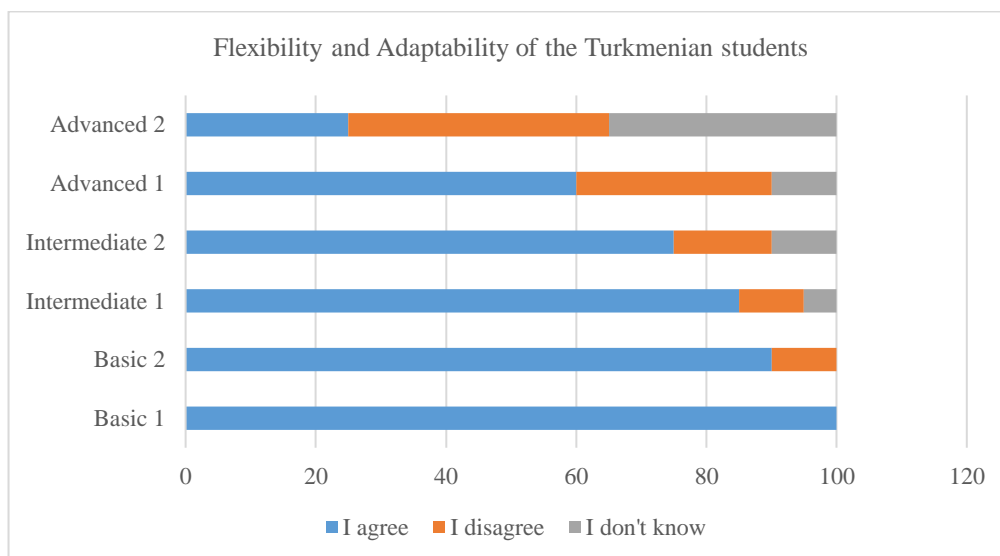


Figure 01. Flexibility and adaptability of the Turkmenian students at the end of the first year of study in the Russian university from their own perspectives

The blue colour of the diagram shows the Turkmenian students' level of flexibility from their own perspective. It is clear that not many of the students have achieved the advanced level. Probably, they will acquire it during their second and third year of study in the Russian university. Unfortunately, someone will not get it at all even at the end of his/her fifth year of study. Surely, it depends on many factors.

7. Conclusion

This study supports the view that international students learn new cultures through experience, through the skills of flexibility and adaptability. Obviously, international students have very many problems with adaptation and adjustment, which can affect their studies and the general impression of living in another country. Nevertheless, they have a very good opportunity to get involved into a new culture and to develop their intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship. Despite some problems concerning flexibility and adaptability issues, the ideas of export of education are very strong and influential in the sphere of higher education worldwide.

Future studies on international students should be dedicated to exploring the impact of studying abroad on the intellectual development and personal growth of the international students, to explaining and measuring these phenomena.

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