

Taiwan University Student Experiences and Perceptions on What It Means to be “Global”: Stories from “Less Funded” Students

Yvonne Y. F. Liu

Center of Teacher Education, Minghsin University of Science & Technology, Hsinchu, Taiwan
Email: yvonneok@gmail.com

Gary L. Vore Jr.

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Nanhua University, Chiayi, Taiwan
Email: garyvore@nhu.edu.tw

Abstract—This research aims to understand what students from a less-funded university in Taiwan consider to be “global” and how these same students reflect on their lack of travel overseas, lack of foreign nationals as friends, and inability to seek a work or study experience overseas. Data was collected from a single university in northern Taiwan and the survey instrument used was a questionnaire, which focuses on student explanation of “why” they feel less “global” than their peers. While students expressed high motivational desire to travel abroad, have foreign friends, and have the experience to participate in an overseas work/study program, they had little financial support or confidence in their abilities to do so. In addition, these students remarked on the lack of available information and understanding about overseas work/study programs. Further support from teachers is necessary for guidance purposes. Further financial support for less fortunate students is also needed.

Index Terms—global view, university students, social capital, Taiwan

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Being Global

In this internationalized era, being global is an indicator and an important goal for universities throughout the world. Hundreds of exchanges programs have been organized by universities, organizations or foundations such as Erasmus Program established by the European Union (EU), the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) from the Non-Profit Organization (NPO) and the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) by NGO. For university students in Taiwan, there are numerous exchange programs for Taiwanese students to study abroad and for foreign students to study in Taiwan. According to statistics from the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE), student participation in both programs is dramatically increasing [1], [2].

This might be partial evidence to indicate university students in Taiwan have numerous chances to cultivate their worldview. The distribution of mobility resources, however, is centered on students within top universities. “Top universities” refers to that described by the Taiwan Ministry of Education and represent the nation’s leading universities such as National Taiwan University (NTU), National Cheng Kung University (NCKU), or National Chiao Tung University (NCTU) [3]. Within the confines of this research and paper, universities in Taiwan can roughly be divided into three groups. These include the nation’s top universities that often receive much funding and support. The second group is the “middle” or “standard” universities that receive some funding and are often part of the Program for Promoting Teaching Excellence universities [4]. The third group is the “lower”, most often private universities, which receive very limited funding from MOE. They tend to put funding priority on teaching or other activities but less frequently on improving students’ global view.

As a representation, of all foreign national students who studied in Taiwan during 2013, 3.16% of these foreign students attended a top university, 0.57% attended a “middle” university, which was involved with the Program for Promoting Teaching Excellence Universities, and 0.02% from the lower level, non-funded universities [5]. This means students who are not enrolled in top universities in Taiwan may show extreme difference in their views of what it means to be global compared to the students from more well-funded universities. So, which students are more representative of global views and who has a better chance for being educated abroad? Whose global views are not represented? These questions make it important to gather information from students who are not within Taiwan’s top university environment.

Research in Taiwan has shown that social capital and achievement motivation are positively correlated [6], [7]. Students who have higher social capital show a higher motivation for learning. Moreover, university social capital is a more powerful explanation of student motivation and achievement than is family [6]. Further, social-economic status and personal capital acquired play

significant roles in the process of studying abroad [8]. If being global is the crucial competence for university students to be equipped, it is necessary to understand student experience and thinking about what it means to be global.

It is evident that foreign contact influence students' global view [9], especially when considering a study exchange or service experience [10]. The more students have contact in foreign environments, the deeper the foreign power influences their future study and even their global views [11]. In addition, in Taiwan, students' self-identity is a factor in their development to be more global-minded [12]. It is important to know not only students' foreign experience but also motivation and thinking about how to be more global. As for students attending the "lower" universities, many may not have numerous chances of exchange study. As such, some alternative foreign experience such as travel or friendships might be an initial dimension to understand their thinking of what it means to be global.

Therefore, the purpose in this study is to explore university students' experiences and perceptions of global views by examining their travel, friendship, and study experience. The research questions examined are:

1. What is students' background of being global?
2. What is student motivation for being global?
3. How do students self-assess on ways to be more global?

II. DATA COLLECTION

A. Subjects

Senior (4th year) university students from one private university in Taiwan. Subject data collection for this research involved 53 university students who are in their fourth year (senior) of undergraduate study from one private university in northern Taiwan. As such, average age of students is 21 years. These students are enrolled in the early childhood education and care department within the institution. Students were asked to complete the survey to the best of their ability. As for the number of student responses, data collection was obtained from students who chose the course entitled, Global Service of ECEC. There are 63 students enrolled in this course and the questionnaire was distributed during three consecutive classes. However, due to timing of the data collection and student internships, there was a small group of students absent during each class meeting. Therefore, the number of total students completing each of the three sections of the questionnaire varies and numerical results are affected as such. Lastly, a translation issue must be brought to light. The original questionnaire was designed and written in Mandarin Chinese. Students answered the survey questions in Mandarin as well. It was up to the lead author to translate statements expressed by students into English for data extrapolation and presentation here.

B. Data Collection: Questionnaire

Research data collection consisted of a hard copy questionnaire. This survey instrument included nine semi-

open ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into three sections and considered student 1) travel experience, 2) foreign contacts, and 3) personal exchange and study or service plan. Questions sought student personal background, motivation, and self-assessment of the three sections above and how these were accomplished by students. As an example, the topic for section two was foreign contact. Questions included:

- a. Do you have a foreign friend? Where and how did you make contact?
- b. Do you want to have a foreign friend? Why?
- c. What kinds of competence do you think you should have to make friends with a foreigner? Why?

Of the questions above, it should be noted that questions made no reference to whether students had a foreign friend or not and whether they wanted a first foreign friend or an additional friend. Data examined for this research focuses on the rational of student responses.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Travel

As for travel experience, fewer than half of 53 students questioned had traveled abroad. Only 23 students had done so. Of these 53 students, the countries most often traveled to were within Asia (21) with the exception of one student who had traveled to Australia and another who had been to France. A professional travel agency most often accomplished travel plans (3 out of 23 students) and this entailed inclusion in pre-planned and pre-organized group tours.

Motivation for traveling abroad is high for these students who attend a less funded university. Virtually all students (52 out of 53) remarked they had the desire to travel to a foreign country. Student self-assessment of their travel competence is lacking. Of the 53 students, 45 students think they do not have enough ability, skill, or competence to travel abroad. Five students remarked financial inability as their reason for not going abroad. Eleven students believe attitude and courage, and 15 students consider their English language skills to be inadequate for going abroad. However, the most common reason for 22 students not traveling abroad is their lack of any previous overseas travel. Two students described their apprehension in this manner.

"I've never been abroad. Of course I want to travel abroad, but if you ask me to do it alone, or even with small group (but not from travel agency) and well-funded, I might not go. It's too much for me. (S26)"

"I've read some stories about gap year. They seem well-experienced in arranging travel such as air tickets and hostel bookings.... For me, I've only been to China once and in group tour. How I can manage to travel all by myself? (S03)"

In other words, the most common reason for not traveling abroad is not lack of English language skills but rather the lack of previous travel experience. Survey subjects within this university have fewer experiences to travel abroad and as such, consider this the main reason for their inability to travel abroad. According to Cheng

[6], social capital in university is important for students to think about how they can do things in their lives. Therefore, it is of critical importance to help students from “lower” universities by supporting additional opportunities to travel abroad.

B. Foreign Contact

As for student experience with foreign individuals, less than one-third, only 16 out of 52, have any foreign nationals they consider a friend. Despite their lack of foreign contacts, their motivation for making foreign friends is high with all 52 students (100%) confirming this desire. It is difficult to understand individual student reasoning for their desire however, it is clear they want to learn from a foreign friend. Exchanging cultural experiences and sharing was one of the main reasons students’ desired contact with a foreign individual with 15 out of 52 students commenting as such. Another 15 out of 53 students thought a foreign friend would improve their global knowledge and global awareness. Nine of 52 students desired their foreign friend to provide some type of support during travel, and only 6 out of 52 students considered language learning as the main motivational factor having a foreign national as a friend.

Students were asked to self-assess and respond as to why they want to make new or additional foreign friends. For 17 out of 52 responses, to understand foreign culture and have more global awareness were most prevalent. In addition, for another 17 out of 52 students, to have better social and communicative skills was also important. Another 12 of 52 believe gaining courage and enhancing positive attitudes was a benefit to their having foreign friends. Two students summed up their beliefs for the lack of foreign friend support as follows.

“I want to have a foreign friend because I think I may see things differently and from another point of view. In fact, however, I don’t know where I can find them. There is no connection between my life and foreigner’s. (S18)”

“I know it is important to have a foreign friend because I can learn English, exchange culture experience and have fun, but I don’t know how to start. I don’t know anyone from other countries. (S16)”

From students’ opinions about foreign contact, it is shown they lack foreign contact, but their comments support extremely high motivation about making foreign friends. Students want to learn, know, and understand more information that is global rather than mere language learning or language exchange. Language exchange is usually one important method for student improvement with but these students desire to have more personal experience and culture sharing with people from other countries.

C. Exchange, Study or Service Plan

As for student experience with studying abroad, two students out of 58 have had a study or exchange opportunity with one student traveling to Canada and another to Australia. Despite the lack of opportunity for these students to travel abroad, their motivation and desire to travel overseas is high. All 53 students confirmed their desire for overseas experience not only

for leisure but for study or service as well. When asked to explain further as to the reason they didn’t go, lack of funds (29 out of 58) was the most common response, followed by language inadequacy (16 out of 58), and finally, lack of courage to perform well during the trip (13 out of 58).

The reason students did not go abroad their lack of competence of being able to study or doing professional service. Of 58 students, only 29 believe their professional knowledge is sufficient to travel overseas. Queried students (13 out of 58) also consider their competence to actively function and adapt to a foreign environment very limited. Only 11 out of 58 students considered they have adequate communication skills to function overseas. Two examples from students are below.

“I know there is a sister university in the States but I don’t think I’m qualified to go there. I’ve never been abroad. Study abroad is way beyond my current competence. (S45)”

“I don’t think I have a chance to study or do some service abroad. If I have the chance to join a professional service program abroad, I don’t know what I should have except ECEC professional skills. It’s hard to think what I have to prepare to make myself more qualified. (S42)”

Clearly, these students have very limited foreign travel experience. As such, the idea of foreign exchange or study experience may be far beyond their comprehension as to what they need to do while abroad, or how to even apply or get initial details on such a study/service experience. Lack of funds and information are the main reasons stopping students from going abroad according to their survey responses. Lack of knowledge about what to do to apply or prepare for travel abroad seems far beyond their reach. Students are aware they need professional competence but what specifically those professional competences are seem vague.

Similar to their lack of competence of making friends with foreign nationals, so too is their lack of confidence for traveling overseas for study or work exchange. Due to limited experience and information, students have shown through their responses herein that it is important to build the bridge from learning and service in Taiwan to learning and service abroad. This can include detailed information for students to better understand exchange and study programs abroad, how students can acquire funding for such a study or work experience, and how students use their skills to best fit in to a foreign context.

D. Experience, Motivation Andself-Assessment

First, all students within the survey have very limited foreign experience. This includes any of the three categories of foreign travel, foreign contacts, or foreign study/work experience. According to data from this research, the reason behind this is experience is positively related to personal economic conditions. Proof of this is evident in all three or the survey questions. Despite the burden of funding, the motivation and desire to “be global” is extremely strong for students. Students are keenly aware it is important to know, to understand, to reach for global goals; then improve their competence in this internationalized world. It makes sense for them to be

more competent and more global. As for their competence, they need to equip themselves to reach the world, but there is a gap between what they have and what they should have. However, as students, they are unsure how they make themselves more global in their current financial and educational setting.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the survey questions and student responses, it can be seen that “to do”, “to think”, and “to act” these students have limited experience and high motivation yet have vague knowledge of competences to improve themselves to reach their goals. So, what can be done to better equip these students? Perhaps the most plausible would be to make use of their high motivation but lesser language skills and as a means to increase all competence in small parts which can lead them to more global experiences.

Enhancing and working with students is the most critical intervention method, however introducing students to the functioning of service/study programs and how to attain some degree of funding is needed as well. This financial aid should not only be from project funding because it is evidenced through this research that students who have more economic or social capital as resources are those who are likely to have more foreign experience. Course instruction may be another way to support more students having foreign experiences. Once students learn and understand what it means to be “being global”, they are likely to further increase their motivation, thus providing them a stronger base as they examine foreign travel and experience options.

To summarize, more teacher support such as providing information on making foreign contacts is needed. Along with instruction and supervision, consultation by teachers is recommended to meet student needs. The opportunity of having a foreign contact will further enhance student motivation. This, in turn, can increase the likelihood these students can travel abroad on their own, make additional foreign friends, and have the ability and confidence to participate in work or study experiences overseas. It is through what was learned in this investigation and with some suggestions that we remain optimistic and confident that the global views from university students in Taiwan can be not only from those students from “top” universities but for ALL university students in Taiwan.

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Yvonne Y. F. Liu is from Taipei, Taiwan. BA Early Childhood Education, National Taipei University of Education, 2001. MA Early Childhood Education, National Hsinchu University of Education, 2004. PhD visiting student in School of Education, University of Jyväskylä Finland, 2009 and University of Tampere, Finland, 2011. PhD International & Comparative Education, National Chi Nan University, Puli, Taiwan, 2013.

She worked for daycares in north Taiwan, in 2003 and 2005 as kindergarten teacher. From 2006-2007 she worked for Yu-Da University of Technology, Minghsin University of Science and Technology, both in Taiwan as an adjunct lecture both in department of early childhood education. She is presently employed by Minghsin University of Science and Technology in Hsinchu county in Taiwan as an assistant professor of the Center of Teacher Education (in Early Childhood Education) since 2014. She continues her interest in early childhood education in Taiwan and Finland now focus on integrating global education into context of early childhood education and teacher education.

Dr. Liu is a member of international honor society of Education of Kappa Delta Pi. She received the award for best doctor dissertation 2014 from the Chinese Comparative Education Society.



Gary L. Vore Jr. is from Dayton, Ohio, in the USA. BA Communication, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, 1991. MA Bilingual Education & TESOL, The University of Findlay, Findlay, Ohio, 1998. PhD International & Comparative Education, National Chi Nan University, Puli, Taiwan, 2014.

He worked for the Kake Educational Institution in Okayama, Japan, from 1991-2004, as an ESL teacher. From 2007-2012 he worked for National Chi Nan University and National Chiao Tung University, both in Taiwan, as a language instructor. He is presently employed by Nanhua University in Chiayi County in Taiwan as an assistant professor of the Foreign Languages and Literature department since 2014. He continues his interest in ESL and language learning and now includes gender studies and bullying to his interests.

Dr. Vore was awarded membership to the Phi Tau Phi Honor Society of the Republic of China for academic achievement.