

# Language Shock: A Challenge to Language Learning

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## Abstract

*As a result of globalisation and the development of technology, the number of population travelling and studying abroad is increasing dramatically, especially within some English speaking countries, such as America, Canada and Australia. Asian countries, however, have always been the main source of international students. Due to the significant differences in cultures and languages, these students confront challenges and obstacles in both university mainstream lectures and language classrooms. This paper reports a recent study which investigates the understanding and experiences of ten Asian background students in relation to language shocks. It involves the participation of ten Asian background students from the TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages) program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania. Semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings were organised to gather the live experience of these students. The results indicate that the differences in cultures and language indeed have an impact on these Asian background students' English language learning/teaching. However, these "shocks" can be transformed into a motivation of learning. Also, teachers and the university are expected to take an active role in preparing their students in overcoming of culture and language shocks and the development of positive attitude towards English language learning.*

**Key words:** *Language shock, Culture shock, English language learning*

## Introduction

Cultural shock is a widely used concept to describe an experience people encounter in a new cultural environment. It has been mentioned by researchers and educators for decades (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Oberg, 1960). Cultural shock can also be seen as a process which includes different stages people experience in their acculturation into a new culture. Normally negative emotions are present due to unexpected cultural differences in our intercultural experiences such as agitation, unrest, desperation and fear (Adler, 1975). Depending on how cultural shock is handled by individuals, it impacts can be destructive or constructive. Language difference, as one of the main factors leading to culture shock, has also been emphasised. As culture and language are closely linked, cultural shock can be caused by linguistic differences. In other words, language shock is one of the less recognised aspects of cultural shock as its emotional impact is not so overtly strong that it could cause great harm or destruction to individuals who experience it. In learning a second language, we tend to treat the new language in the lenses of our own language.

Asian background students have always been Australia's main source of international students. In the year 2008, 79.1% of international student enrolments came from the Asian group. These Asian background students experience both culture shocks and language shock due to the huge cultural and language differences between Australia and their home countries. This paper shares with you the live experience of ten Asian background students and the language shocks they encountered at the initial stage when they first came to Australian. It aims to introduce you these Asian background students' understanding of "Language Shock", reasons that led to it and the reactions taken to overcome these challenges. Interesting discussions happened in the interviews and focus group meetings will be discussed. This paper also introduces the two main findings emerged from the final stage of the data analysis which verified that language shocks are experienced by these Asian background students, and support from English language teachers are needed in successfully overcoming the different stages of language shocks.

## Literature Review

To understand “Language shock”, firstly the term “Culture Shock” has to be understood. The term “Culture Shock” was firstly proposed by Oberg (1960) in the early 1960’s and considered to be an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly abroad. “Culture Shock” has its own symptoms, cause and occurs like most diseases. At the initial stage, it is believed to be a very much negative impact on people. In the 1970’s, researchers started to consider “Culture Shock” from a more neutral perspective and believe it is more like a reaction rather than a disease. Adler (1975, p. 13) defines that “Culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one’s own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences’. Although the term has been given different definitions at different times, the best consensus statement seems to be the explanation concluded by Taft (1977) from six aspects including being rejected by and/or rejecting members of the new culture and feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment, etc.

Culture shock is one significant barrier to the way of success in intercultural contact. There are various reasons which can lead to culture shock. A similarity-attraction hypothesis suggests that people are more willing to communicate, understand, enjoy, trust, work or play with others who share similar salient characteristics with themselves, such as language, religion, values, age and interests (Byrne, 1969). Therefore, when a person enters a new cultural and language context in which people are having different cultural and language characteristics, the similarity-attraction character would interfere with his/her communication, and culture shock would appear. Another reason which causes culture shock relates to intra-society and inter-society. It is believed by some researchers that individuals carry their own ethnic and/or cultural identity, that is, everyone is identified by the cultural group that he/she belongs to (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). There is research shows that the greater distance between the home culture and the host culture, the more cultural difficulty the overseas students would experience (Freeman & Winch, 1957; Furnham & Bochner, 1982, 1986; Pelto, 1968; Triandis, 1990).

Culture shock has different stages. Lysgaard (1955) states that there are usually four stages in the process of culture shock, Honeymoon stage, Culture Shock stage, Adjustment stage and Mastery stage. He developed the “U-Curve Hypothesis” which shows these four processes, in which international students discover the shocks, experience the shocks, recover and learn about the cultures and finally adapt to the new environment. Other scholars have given different names on the similar patterns, for example, Richardson (1974) names the four stages as “elation”, “depression”, “recovery” and “acculturation”. Adler (1975) on the other hand, defined the stages as “contact”, “disintegration”, “reintegration”, “autonomy” and “independence”. However, all these statements of stages of culture shock are compliant with Lysgaard’s (1955) U-curve theory.

Language, as an important component of culture, also has a great influence on the intercultural competence of international students and any other people who initially moved to another language background. Language is commonly seen as an integral part of culture (Nida, 2003). Nida (2003) argues that factors, such as entities, events, states, process and characteristics of one culture have a strong influence on the content of the language spoken in this culture. Not only cultures have an impact on the languages, but also the languages relatively have great impacts on the cultures that they are embedded in. The theory that languages do affect its users’ world views and mental activities is named linguistic relativity by researchers (Kramsch, 1998). Therefore, language and culture are two closely related factors that influence each other in various and complex ways. The relationships of two cultures and the languages spoken in them are shown in Figure 1 below. Culture shocks exist when people are transferred from one culture to another; linguistics shock would exist when the language environment is switched to another language environment.

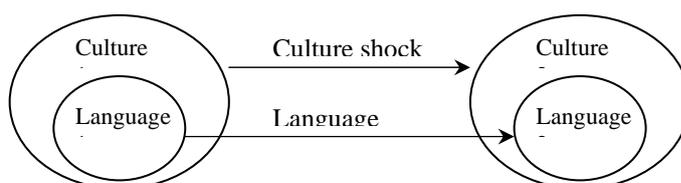


Figure 1: Cul-

guage shock

ture shock and lan-



As language and culture are closely related, culture can have a great impact on language shock and this is clearly evidenced from the linguistic aspects and the aspect of sociolinguistic. On the one hand, language shock from the linguistic perspective for instance, language shock can occur at different linguistic levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. For instance, speakers of languages which do not have affixes may find “infix” as an unimaginable linguistic phenomenon (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Marnish, 2001). On the other hand, as each culture has its own ways of expressing thoughts, feelings and of sharing speakers’ inner world (Alptekin, 2002), the different ways in which speakers of different cultures and languages talk about the human world and this could be a source of language shock (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Hinkel, 1999).

## Research aim and objectives

This research aims to investigate the Asian background students’ understanding and experiences in relation to language shocks and the role of culture in second language learning. It intends to achieve this aim by pursuing the following three research objectives:

- To investigate the experiences of Asian background students on culture shock and language shock;
- To examine the affects of language shocks on learning English language;
- To give recommendations on how these Asian background students can be better supported in overcoming language shocks.

## Participants and activities

This study involved the participation of ten Asian background students from four different language backgrounds, including China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Korea. These students were studying in the TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages) program at the University of Tasmania at the time this researcher was conducted. All of them had experiences in learning English as a second language, as well as teaching English in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms; therefore, they could speak from both an English language learner and an English teacher’s perspectives. The length they have been in Australia range from 4 months to 4 years 1 month. Details of the participants’ home countries, semester commenced in the TESOL program, participation in the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and the length of staying in Australia are shown in Table 1 below. The names given to the participants are pseudonyms.

*Table 1: Background in formation of the participants and data collection*

Home country	Name	Semester	Interviews	Focus groups	Length of studying
<b>China</b>	Mary	1	Yes	Yes	2 years 6 months
	Fiona	2	Yes	Yes	4 years 1 month
	Lily	1	Yes	Yes	8 months
	Young	1	Yes	Yes	9 months
	Billy	1	Yes	Yes	6 months
<b>Vietnam</b>	Mia	2	Yes	X	2 years 3 months
	John	2	Yes	Yes	4 months
<b>Malaysia</b>	Jennie	1	Yes	X	11 months
	Olivia	2	Yes	X	5 months
<b>Korea</b>	Shinny	1	Yes	Yes	3 years 5 months

These ten Asian background students were engaged in weekly focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. They were encouraged to exchange ideas and share experiences in relation to

the language differences encountered when they first arrived in Australia. Each of them has participated in one semi-structured interview which was guided by a set of eight questions. Seven of them have also participated in four one-hour focus group discussions which were led by a given topic. Both the questions in the interviews and the topics in the group discussion were developed to best address the research aim and objectives.

## Findings

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using the constructivist ground theory approach (Charmaz, 2003, 2006) and involved the three step coding processes of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At the end of the three step coding process, 5 categories were constructed from the participants' responses. These categories enabled the researcher to start to recognise dominant discourses surrounding the Asian students' experiences in relation to the language differences. The 5 categories and the themes involved in them are listed in Table 2 below:

*Table 2: Categories (Selective codes)*

Categories (Selective codes)	Responses
Category 1: Experiences about language shocks	102
Linguistic aspects of shock	43
Sociolinguistic aspects of shock	33
Negative experiences about language impoliteness	26
Category 2: Affects of language shocks on learning English language	89
Negative effects on learning English language	44
Positive effects on learning English language	31
Overcoming language shocks	14
Category 3: Relationships between language shocks and culture shocks	63
language shocks and culture shocks are inter-related	42
linguistic and culture affect each other	16
language shock as part of culture shock	5
Category 4: Concerns about language shocks	27
stages of language shocks	12
Lacking of confidence	9
Seeking for support	6
Category 5: Understandings about language shocks	19
Personal understandings about language shocks	19

### Category 1: Experiences about language shocks

The first dominant category emerged from the selective coding process is "Experiences about language shocks" which had 102 responses and became the most significant category. It is constructed from four themes emerged in the axial coding process. This category emphasises the "shocks" of these Asian students in relation to their language differences. These students introduced the language shocks they encountered both from a linguistic aspect and a sociolinguistic aspect. Some of them also shared some negative experiences about language impoliteness and how they managed to overcome these situations. The significant number of codes and response in this category indicates that language shock does exist in the experiences of these Asian students in the first few years when they come to study in Australia.

In the interviews and focus group discussions, both linguistic aspect of shocks and sociolinguistic aspect of shocks were mentioned by the participants. Firstly, the significant number of responses indicates that the linguistic aspect of shocks is the most significant influence that affects the students most. These shocks are mainly caused by the different usage of grammar, pronunciations, and vocabularies between English language and their native languages. The main difficulties the Asian students had in the linguistic area were including using of articles, plural nouns, prepositions, tenses, as well as the pronunciation of certain syllables. Articles were mentioned by all participants from all the four Asian countries. These students met difficulties in remembering to use articles and using them properly. Fiona from China argued that she found very confusing about using “a”, “an” and “the” before nouns because there are no articles in Chinese. Also she could not determine when to use them and which one to use. Lily, however, discussed that she had problems using the right prepositions. She said *“I don’t know when to use prepositions like to, for, on, with, of and about, I can’t work out which one I should use. My teachers in the language centres didn’t understand, they just told me to read it aloud and I would find the mistake, but I think it is because we don’t have these in Chinese and I am not sensitive enough to these prepositions.”*

Apart from the articles and prepositions, John from Vietnam mentioned that he tended to forget to use plural nouns as all the nouns in Vietnamese are in a singular form. He argued that *“When I say two houses, because I have already said two, people would know the noun is plural. We don’t say the “s” in Vietnamese, and I think it is still logical, but English teachers here saw my explanation as an excuse. Also some plural nouns are irregular, for example, people say mice instead of mouses. This is very confusing.”* Lastly, pronunciation is also seen by the Asian students as one of the biggest challenges and shocks. Shinny from Korea found she tends to mix up the sounds /p/ and /f/ because these sounds do not exist in Korean. The students from China, however, thought that they tended to skip the sound /l/ and to pronounce both /v/ and /w/ as the same sound of /w/. Mia, from Vietnam, thought it is difficult to say the English words with more than three syllables because there are only two or three syllables within one word in Vietnamese, but in English there can be five or six.

In terms of the sociolinguistic aspect, the most significant code emerged from the participants’ responses are the different understandings toward Linguistic etiquette. It can be seen from the data that some ways of expression may cause shocks on Asian students who initially arrived in Australia even these expressions are commonly used. For instance, students from countries in which people call lecturers by titles felt shocked when they were told to call their lecturers by names. Some refused to change and insisted to call their lecturers by “Mr.” or “Mrs” during their university study. Some students also felt scared to talk to local people because they were afraid of offend them by asking questions which may make them uncomfortable. Also, students from China and Korea felt shocking about the direct comments of criticising and complementing expressed by local people. Two evidences are given below:

*Some people serving in shops said “Hi, love” to me as a greeting. In China, people who do not know each other well would never say this. Only the people who are flirting would say. It took me a while to find out they are just trying to be nice, especially, later on I find both male and female use this phrase. (Jennie)*

*I think the people in Australian talks more openly, directly and actively, and Korean people talks more indirectly, passively and use more polite senses. For example, in Korean if someone tells me my dress is pretty, I would say “No, it is not pretty at all”, but here I say “Thank you.”, and if I say “No, it is not pretty” here in Australia, people would think my reaction is strange. (Young)*

“Negative experiences about language impoliteness” was emerged as a dominant theme in this category. This theme indicates that some of the Asian background students experienced language impoliteness in public areas due to their Asian appearances and their influent English language. These negative experiences were seen by the Asian background students as both a culture shock and a language shock. Some of them felt angry and frustrated, some of the others felt upset and uncomfortable. However, most of the students who confronted this situation would choose to ignore the behaviour because they thought ignorance is the best way to avoid conflict. Only two of them said that they would try to stop the offending by communicating or asking for help. Some evidence is introduced below:

*I had some nasty experiences about swearing. Most of the time, it happens on teenagers who are 12 to 14 years old. Some of them group together in the city central and swore to Asian looking people for no reason. Personally I feel pretty bad about this. I did not do anything wrong to harm anyone. At first I could not understand what they were saying, because they try to use*

*some nasty words that I was not familiar with, and they seemed to know that I wouldn't understand. After a short period I started to understand, so I was angry. There was one time I could not stand any more, and I was learning to be a primary school teacher who will teach students in this age, so I sit down next to a girl, about 12 years old, and asked her which her school is, and what would she feel if others say something nasty to her, then I told her if she keeps doing it I would have to call the police. Then she realised I could understand, and my English was fluent enough to deal with her, so she stopped. The funny thing is sometimes what their attitudes are depends on how good my English is. (Fiona)*

## **Category 2: Affects of language shocks on learning English language**

Affects of language shocks in learning English language was emerged to be the second largest category which had 89 responses. This category included both the positive effects and negative effects of language shocks on the Asian background students. The theme "Negative influences in learning English language" has a slightly larger number than the other theme, as the participants have given more responses in this theme. Firstly, all the ten Asian background students agree that language shock has negative influences on peoples' views and attitudes toward learning English language. The misunderstanding and confusion occurred may make people feel disengaged and reduce their passion of learning. Some students may also feel depression, frustration and embarrassment, or give up on learning the language. However, most of the participants also mentioned that although language shocks have a negative effect, it may also become a positive influence if handled properly. Some participants thought that mistakes are a great opportunity to learning a language. For instance, Billy from China said that "On the bright side, language shock can trigger one's motivation to explore the new language." Mary also shared that "It could also be a motivation because if you want to know more about the culture, learning its language is probably the best way, and I think some difficulties occurred during the process of English learning are also a motivation to attempt me to learn more."

"Overcoming language shocks" appeared as the last theme in this category. While the participants shared experiences about language shocks, they were also asked the actions they took to overcome this obstacle. The participants argued in the focus group discussions that one way to overcome language shocks is to actively interact and communicate to local friends. Interacting with people within the local community and the university can help the students develop language awareness and gain support in the overcoming process. Moreover, most participants agree that having a positive attitude towards language shocks is very important. They believed that how "shocks" affect them is depending on how they react and deal with the "shocks". The shocks may become motivations in learning a language when they are treated with a positive attitude. Evidence is introduced below:

*I think the influence is negative, but the time it lasts can be different. If you take it positively and communicate and ask the other people, it goes away quickly, but if you take it negatively, it will last longer. (Lily)*

## **Category 3: Relationships between language shocks and culture shocks**

The third category emerged is "Relationships between language shocks and culture shocks". The Asian background students were asked what their views are on the relationships between language shocks and culture shocks. There is an agreement among all the participants that there two factors are closely related. These students believed that language and culture are embedded in each other and affecting each other. That is, all the languages spoken are influences by the cultures in which it is spoken in, and the languages in turn are shaping the cultures too. Some participants further discussed that language shocks are a component of culture shocks; therefore, learning a language can enhance a person's understandings about this culture and a sense of belonging. John gave his understandings on the relationships that "Culture shocks are more psychology-oriented while language shocks focus more on linguistic factors." Fiona, however, argued that "Australian culture is western culture and Chinese culture is eastern culture. So when you are speaking the two languages, English and Chinese, you do not only need to be aware of the grammar difference and vocabularies, but also the different ways and contents in speaking."

## **Category 4: Concerns about language shocks**

The fourth theme emerged in the selective coding step is "Concerns about language shocks. This category focuses on the Asian background students" responses to the language shocks they experienced. Due to the language differences, these participants started their university study with doubts about their own abilities; however, as their language skills and understandings about Australian cul-

tures progress they start to enjoy and become more confident in learning. This is evidenced in the three themes this category contains, “Stages of language shocks”, “Lacking of confidence” and “Seeking for support”. Firstly, the participants have different understandings toward the stages of language shock. Fiona, for example, thought that the first nine months are time within which language shocks occur most frequently. She also stated that within the following one year the occurrences of culture shocks will gradually reduce so ESL students’ confidence will increase accordingly. Shiny argued that the first stage is the “confusing stage” in which the students involved would feel confused, but after then the students would start to ask a lot of questions and it becomes the “exploring stage”. Mia, on the other hand, discussed that language shocks start with the “embarrassing stage” in which the students would feel embarrassed. Students would then start to communicate and explain for themselves and the “defending stage” would come. Although the participants gave different understandings on the stages of language shock, they all supported the idea that language shocks can be overcome and language skills and confidence can be gained along with the progress. In addition, most participants indicated the need of support from the university. It can be seen from the transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions that support from the faculty, the English language centre, and English assistances are desired by these Asian background students. Some participant pointed out that “Having professional support would greatly assist in overcoming language shocks. However, the teachers should have an understanding about the influences of the ESL students’ first language in order to make a judgement on how the shocks have occurred.”

### **Category 5: Understandings about language shocks**

The category “Understandings about language shock” appeared as the last category and had the smallest number of responses (N=19). The emerging of this category corresponds to one of the questions discussed in the focus group discussions “in your view what you do consider a ‘language shock’ is?” The ESL pre-service teachers give various answers to this question. Most of the Asian background students claimed that a language shock is a shock caused by language and culture differences, and it is closely related to culture shocks. Apart from the general agreement, the participants also tended to give explanations and examples about language shocks. For instance, Shiny argued that “Language shocks can even happen within the same language systems. It can happen between grandparents and grandchildren if the older generation are not familiar with the language used by the young generations, so I think the different behaviours and attitudes are also one important reason that causes language shocks.” Young, however, explained that “A language shock refers to the fact that some terms and expressions in one language are different from one another, and they cannot be understood by foreigners who come from other language and cultural backgrounds. For example, I can’t understand some English slangs and proverbs, and I don’t get the exact meanings of some terms even I have caught every single word said by the other person.”

## **Discussions**

This research has uncovered two significant findings in understanding the Asian background students’ perceptions of their experiences in relation to the language differences. The first finding is that language shocks are experienced by Asian background students within this university context. This student group has a clear understanding about language shock as an influence on emotions which is brought by the differences between language systems, attitudes and impressions. A language shock involves a matter of degree and different stages and has the features of pragmatic and segmental. Also, these participants’ tend to have problems in some certain language phenomenon in both the linguistic aspect and the sociolinguistic aspect. The language phenomenon is shown in Table 3 in the following page:

*Table 3: A conclusion of shocks from both linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects*

Linguistic aspect of shocks	Sociolinguistic aspect of shocks
Articles	Complement
Plural nouns	Criticize
Prepositions	Greeting
Tenses	Appellation
Pronunciation of certain syllables	Phonology: Sound, pitch, tone, pausing

These experiences given by the participants further proved the theories mentioned in the literatures. According to Chesterman (1998) and James (1980), ESL students' first languages tend to interfere with their target language learning. From a linguistic aspect, these participants are more likely to make errors in the language phenomenon that is not existing or different from their first languages. The students had difficulties in using the right articles, plural nouns, prepositions, tenses and pronunciations as this phenomenon are presented differently in English language. From a socio-linguistic aspect, however, the student participants were shocked by the ways how local people greet, complement and criticise, as well as how appellations and phonology factors are applied.

The second finding concluded from this research is that language shocks follow a similar process as culture shocks. Although the Asian student gave different understandings on the stages of language shocks they experienced, the stages they described can all be fit into Lysgaard's (1955) "U-Curve Hypothesis" in cross-culture practices. That is, these Asian students' language learning experiences are moving towards the stages of Honeymoon, Language shock, Adjustment and Mastery. All the participants in this research have passes the Honeymoon stage which seems to the smoothest stage, therefore, it was rarely mentioned by them in the group discussions or interviews. The six students, who have been in the new language context within one year, were still experiencing new language shocks and trying to adjust to the new language environment. However, the four students who have been here for more than two years have adjusted to the English language context and become confident in using English language for intercultural communication. This is supported by Lysgaard's (1955) "U-Curve Hypothesis" which shows that most students would feel the strongest culture shock and make the adjustments to survive within the first twelve months and move towards the Mastery stage after twenty-four months. This finding emphasises the strong relationship between culture shocks and language shocks.

For these Asian students to overcome the language shocks successfully there is a need of getting support from teachers and assistance at the university. Language shocks have negative influences as culture shock; therefore, students may experience doubting, depressing and struggling when they encounter language shocks. Some students who have stronger confidence in their language abilities would adjust themselves and progress gradually; some other students, however, may start to doubt themselves and give up on learning. Therefore, assistance from the English language teachers and from the university would help these students' to adjust and transit to the Mastery stage successfully. In addition, as ESL students' language learning is strongly influenced by their first languages, teachers need to consider the similarities and differences of the two languages to prevent some predictable language errors and shocks.

## Conclusion

This chapter has introduced you to a study which was conducted with ten Asian background students at the University of Tasmania. These students experience language shocks during to the different language and cultural backgrounds. Data collected from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews show that language shocks are concerned both in a linguistic and a sociolinguistic aspect. Within both aspects, there are a certain number of language phenomenon within which language shocks are more likely to happen. The live experiences shared by the participants also show that linguistics shocks has a similar pattern as culture shocks, and may cause negative influences on the students' views and attitudes toward second language learning. However, the shocks can be trans-

formed into a positive influence which motivates these ESL students to learn more about the English language. At the same time, universities and English language teachers are expected to take an active role in preparing the students in the adjustments of language shocks and help them to develop a positive attitude.

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