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Abstract

Every year, there are more than 2500 new international students coming to Lund University and starting their higher education path. A higher number of foreign students increased the international competitiveness of Lund University, but at the same time the international students had to face many problems for instance, culture shock and language barriers. In this report we focused on issues in teaching international students, specifically group separation, language barriers and cultural differences. The problem of group separation lays in isolation experienced by international students from local students, making it harder for them to communicate with each other. Consequently, the result could be to build up language and culture boundaries between the local students and international students. In order to solve these problems, based on our discussion in the report we suggest few possible techniques.

Keywords: *culture differences, language barriers, group separation, international students, international friendship formation*

1 Introduction

Lund University has the highest number of new foreign students in Sweden with approximately 2500 students beginning in 2012, out of the 20000 total new exchange students [1]. After ten years of steady increase in the number of international students in Sweden, it has decreased with almost 30% the year 2012, mostly because of the introduction of admission fees for students outside the EU/EES area. The group most affected by this decrease is the free mover group going down from 8200 students the previous year to 1700 the following year, see Figure 1 for a graph.

The distribution of international students is as follows: of the total 38000 students the vast majority comes from either Europe (18300) or Asia (11300) which totals 78%, Africa (1330), North America (2000), South America (400), and Oceania (500). And within the 18300 students from Europe the Nordic countries make up 3200 of the population. Exchange students from the Nordic countries probably have less problems with issues that international students from e.g. Asia have with the language barriers and cultural differences, as their language and culture does not diverge a lot from the Swedish.

In this paper we would like to focus on international students' problems regarding integration with the local students with emphasis on group separation, language barriers and cultural differences. Group separation is referring to the tendency that both local and international students keep to themselves, instead of mixing with each other, specially when doing group work. Language barriers are when the students' proficiency in English is lacking, and problems occur because of that. Cultural differences is, on the other hand, referring to differences in culture between local and international students, or students from the east and west. All these can cause challenges in how the students deal with each other and relate to the teaching.

2 Intercultural friendship formation

Intercultural friendship formation and its underlying mechanisms could be useful to teachers, facing students from every part of the world, often dealing with groups clusterization, especially in lab classes. In [8], the authors made a qualitative analysis, trying to extrapolate the main causes guiding intercultural friendship
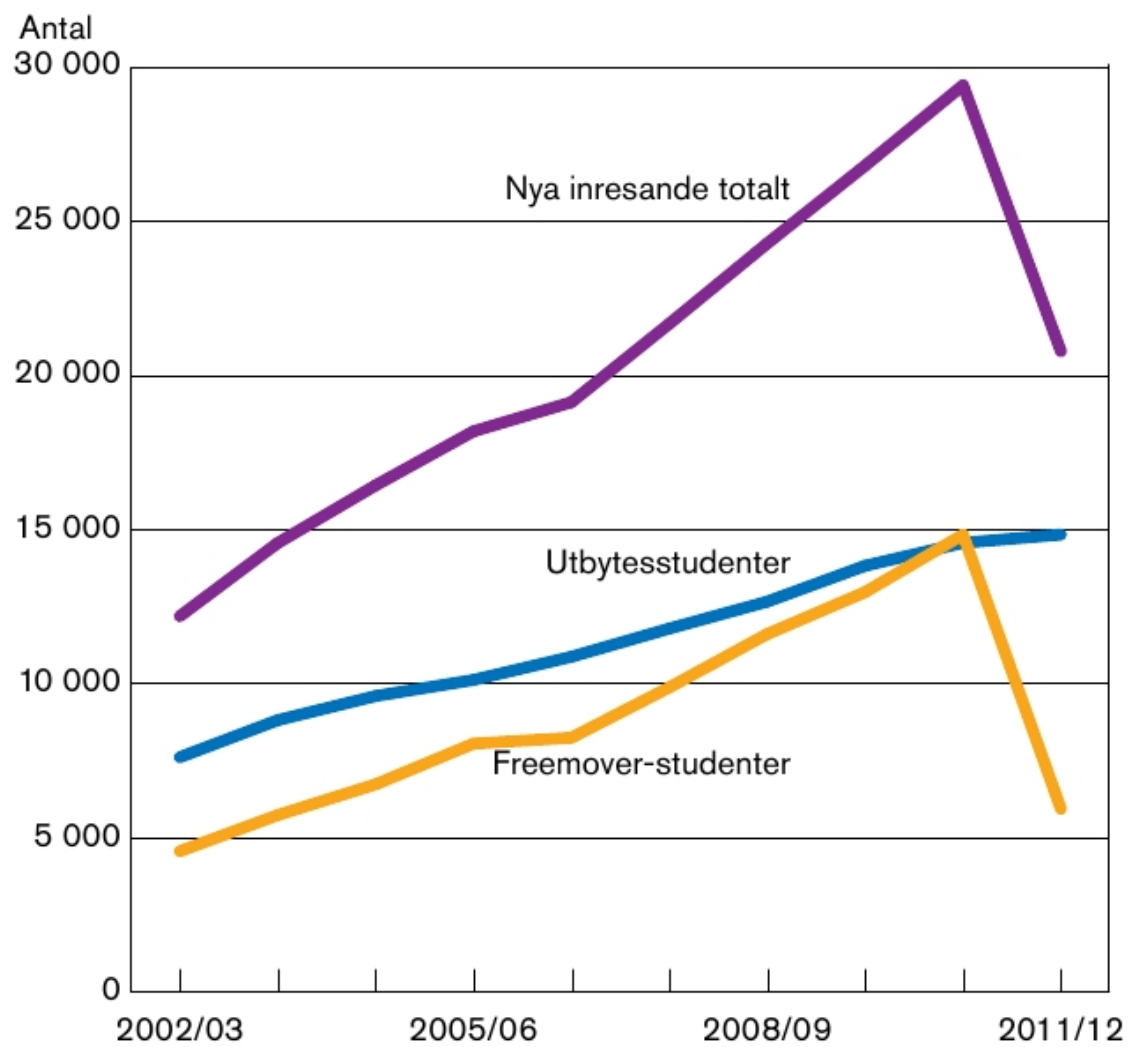
Figure 1: New arrivals for international students in the time period 2002/03 - 2011/12. The y-axis represents the number of students, and "Nya inresande totalt" = new arrivals total, "Utbytetstudenter" = exchange students, "Freemover-studenter" = Freemover students. From [1].
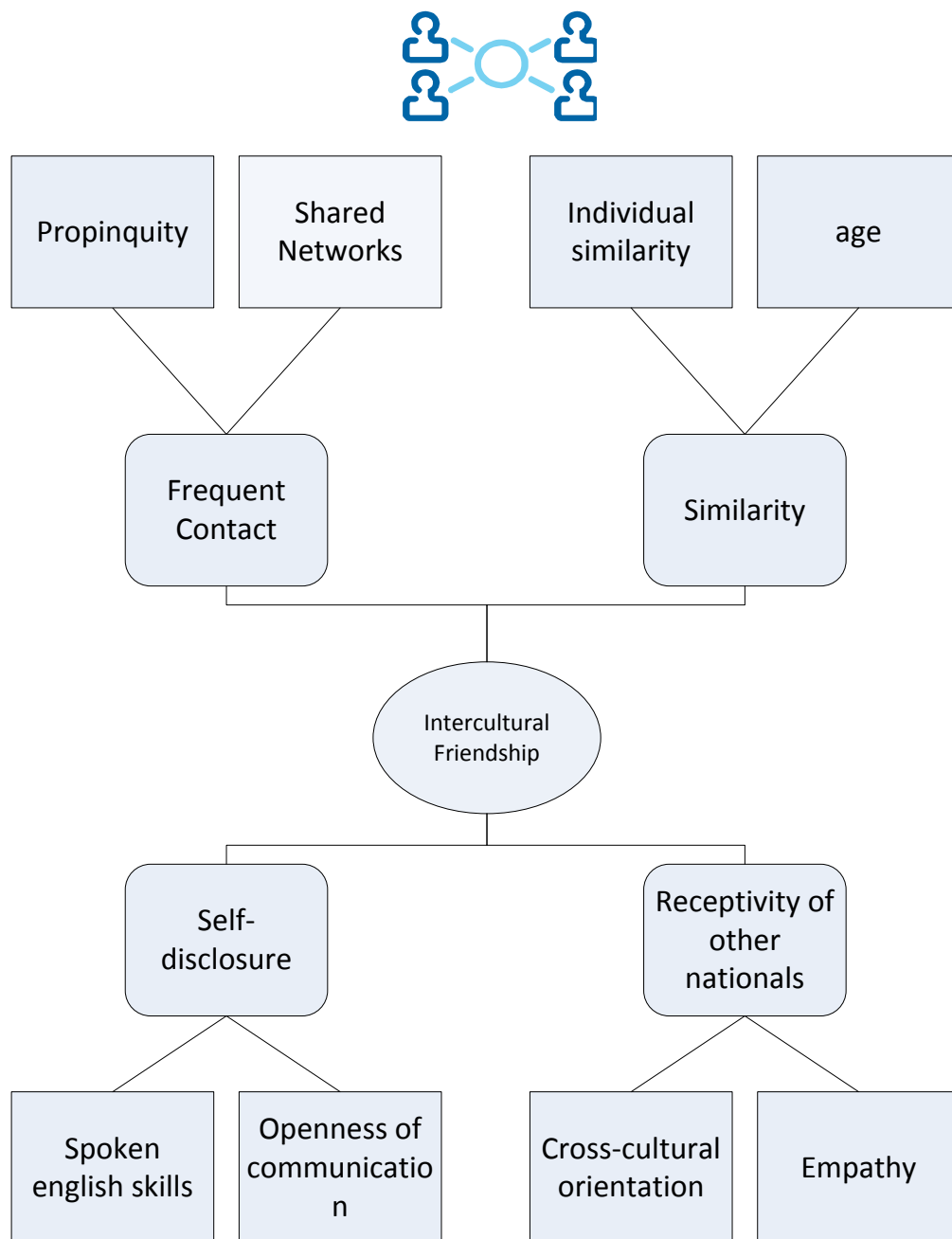
Figure 2: Intercultural friendship formation

formation and what leads to a successful intercultural friendship. They interviewed six Japanese students at La Trobe University in Melbourne (AU). First, all of them were females, since in that faculty the majority of students are females, and male students could be biased given that gender balance. Secondly, they considered only undergraduate students, since they have more time to hang out with others. Then, for the same reason as the latter, they interviewed only unmarried students. Subsequently, they must have been living in Australia for an entire year, so they had enough time to know the environment. Lastly, they had no relationships with interviewers. One of the authors is Japanese as well, so they could interpret results in the right cultural frame, being able to discern between simple acquaintances and true friendships. They found four main categories, and two subcategories for each category, as shown in Figure 2. The results are summarized in the following.

2.1 Frequent contact

Frequent contact was found to be a determinant factor in friendship formation: people with whom they had sparse contacts were not perceived as friends, but more as occasional acquaintances; the two subfactors involved are described below.

- Propinquity
  Friendship is built easier when it requires few efforts to be established, being perceived as a leisure activity, so, not involving special tasks to be accomplished. In this frame, it is easier to build friendship, when some spaces are shared, such as dorms, common classrooms or libraries where students study together. In fact, students said that they established more intercultural friendships while living in dorms rather than in flats or off-campus accommodations.

- Shared networks
  The friendship process is eased also when they are introduced by friends to their friends, essentially speeding up building a social network through common nodes, a well known phenomenon also in other fields, such as computer science [5].

2.2 Similarity

They pointed out similarity as an important factor, and two main subcategories emerged.

- Individual similarity
  Common interests, attitudes, values and behaviors were perceived as main aggregators by the majority of the interviewed subjects, as it also eases the friendship process, as the case of propinquity, and helps to see others as individuals, not as representatives of another culture.

- Age
  Obviously, having similar ages helps exploiting similarities and common places, as subjects pointed out.

2.3 Self-disclosure

Subjects pointed out that talking is essential in establishing friendship, and the more self-disclosure is involved, the more close is the relationship.

- Spoken English skills
  Living in a bilingual environment, is very important to have advanced English skills in order to communicate; good English skills, according to subjects, help to reduce anxiety in initial conversation, increase confidence and allows to communicate more complicated concepts, improving the quality of conversation, perceived as an important part of a relationship, citing the article [8]

  > With increased competence they gained more rewards from intercultural interaction: and with increased interaction they became more positive in their views of host nationals´ willingness to communicate.

4

- Openness of communication
  What subsequently emerged, was the "defensive stance" of these students in relation to a personal communication, involving feelings and personal opinions; they usually wait until the other makes a personal statement, giving theirs in return, thus, a talkative counterpart makes easier starting a new relationship.

2.4 Receptivity of other nationals

Subjects perceived that a certain amount of receptivity of other nationals from local students helps making acquaintances; the two subfactors involved are described in the following.

- Cross-cultural orientation
  Interest and openness in other cultures in local students is perceived as an important factor in friendship formation. Students that showed interests in traveling and Japanese culture were the most likely to form a cross-cultural friendship. Also, talking in class on common interests is perceived as important, as a student said, as reported in the article [8],

  > [...]because I don't talk so much in class, Australian classmates think that I cannot speak English[...]

  So, making students talk in class seems to be beneficial to integrate them.

- Empathy
  The capacity to understand an overseas student situation, far from its family and with language difficulties, was seen as crucial in building a long-lasting friendship; those students were more likely to establish relationships with local students that showed patience with their faltering English, and kindly wait for them to express what they think without interrupting. So, being patient in class with foreigner students seems a good practice.

3 Group separation

There is evidence [13] to support that despite the increasingly multicultural background of the universities, the most typical pattern of students of different cultures is that of minimal interaction. This is a problem, as it leads to group separation. The problem of group separation is that it separates the local students from the international students, making it harder for them to interact with each other. This leads to problems with language barriers, as the international students are not coming in contact with Swedish, and help to exaggerate cultural differences between the students.

According to [14] both local and international students preferred to work within their own groups when working on assignments. They gave four type of reasons for not mixing when doing group work: cultural-emotional connectedness, language, pragmatism, and negative stereotypes.

- Cultural-emotional connectedness refers to students' perception of feeling more comfortable, thinking the same way, utilizing a similar way of communicating, and sense of humor when interacting with students from the same cultural background.

- Language refers to the students ability to express themselves in writing and speaking, and to articulate their ideas and thoughts in class and in informal situations.

- Pragmatism refers to the students commitments outside class interfering with the group work, such as work or family commitments, which the local students tend to have more of. It can be hard to find times when the group work can be made.

- Negative stereotypes and ethnocentric views refers to the students perception of each other.

The study in [14] shows that, after a successful multicultural group work, students realize that cultural differences are of less importance than having a common goal and a mutual commitment to invest time

and energy in the task. Although this realization may not yet be sufficient for students pro-actively to seek inter-cultural encounters in the future, some valuable culture learning has taken place, which highlights the importance of encouraging all students to engage in inter-cultural interactions.

Group tasks are an area where group separation is made explicit, if self-selection is employed by the teacher. Creating an environment in which clustering of international and local students can occur.

Group membership can be decided by the students themselves, the teacher or an combination of the two. Teacher selections works better if you have some information about the individual students and select membership with this in mind. If the teacher is to decide the group membership, the following tips could be followed [3]: If the group of international students is relatively small comparing to the class size make sure that at least two are in the same group then singly placing them in groups of local students. Be sensitive to global conflicts and understand that students from these areas will not necessary find it easy to work together. Balance the size of the group and the relative diversity of membership, groups should never be too big: five to seven is generally considered optimal. Depending on the task, there may be times when students can choose their own groups with the teacher only confirming their decision.

3.1 Intercultural learning through group work

As pointed above, universities around the world are trying to create a multicultural environment merely injecting a foreign presence in their campuses, but, according to the author in [6], this is not working as expected. Dealing with multicultural groups is something teachers must pay particular attention; in this article ([6]) this problem is analyzed in details and an overall schema emerged (Figure 3). The author sorted various steps to perform in order not to flatten the multicultural group work experience to a mere, limited in time, period of learning (a kind of surface meta-learning), but to transform it in a exciting and meaningful chance to learn to use differences in a constructive way; multicultural learning produces advantages both for students and for universities, counteracting the ethnocentric environment which we can find in most university systems, preparing students to deal with international environments, promoting intercultural communication, and challenging cultural stereotypes. He highlighted how a mere notionistic approach in group work is not sufficing, rather he suggests to involve emotions to achieve a better and complete experience, that's why he advices to let the tutor forming groups, while explaining to students that being in a mixed group, made up both of international and local students, will not affect their average grade, as this is a major concern among them. While doing this, is advised to prepare students for the challenges they will face, counteracting prejudices with active talking, and be sure that every student participates in the project, avoiding the formation of unwanted hierarchies.

Also, tasks must be designed to involve every member of the group, highlighting how different ideas, if critically considered, and constructively questioned, will positively contribute to the group's total outcome, and he calls it "*Productive cultural diversity*"; In this framework, one must assure every member that they can feel safe to express their opinions and views, and that their ideas will be taken into consideration, and, to achieve this purpose, a "facilitator" could be elected, that guards those aspects during the entire group's life; better, that figure could be a rotating role.

It is suggested that using these steps will guide the group from a complete passive tutor-driven group, to an autonomous group, able to exploit cultural differences to achieve a common goal in an effective way.

4 Language barriers

As pointed out in previous sections, language difficulties may cause problems in intercultural friendship formation and group work. Language barriers faced by international students are discussed in this section.

International students who come to a foreign country usually face both academic and social transition issues in the first year of university. In [2], the author shows that academic adjustment problems for international students tend to focus on language issues. In Sweden the study programmes and courses for international students are in English language. To be admitted to these programmes and courses, the international students are required to have a certain level of English language proficiency. For example, in Lund University, both international bachelor and master programmes require the students to demonstrate their English proficiency in one of the following ways: IELTS score of 6.5 with no less than 5.5 in every section,
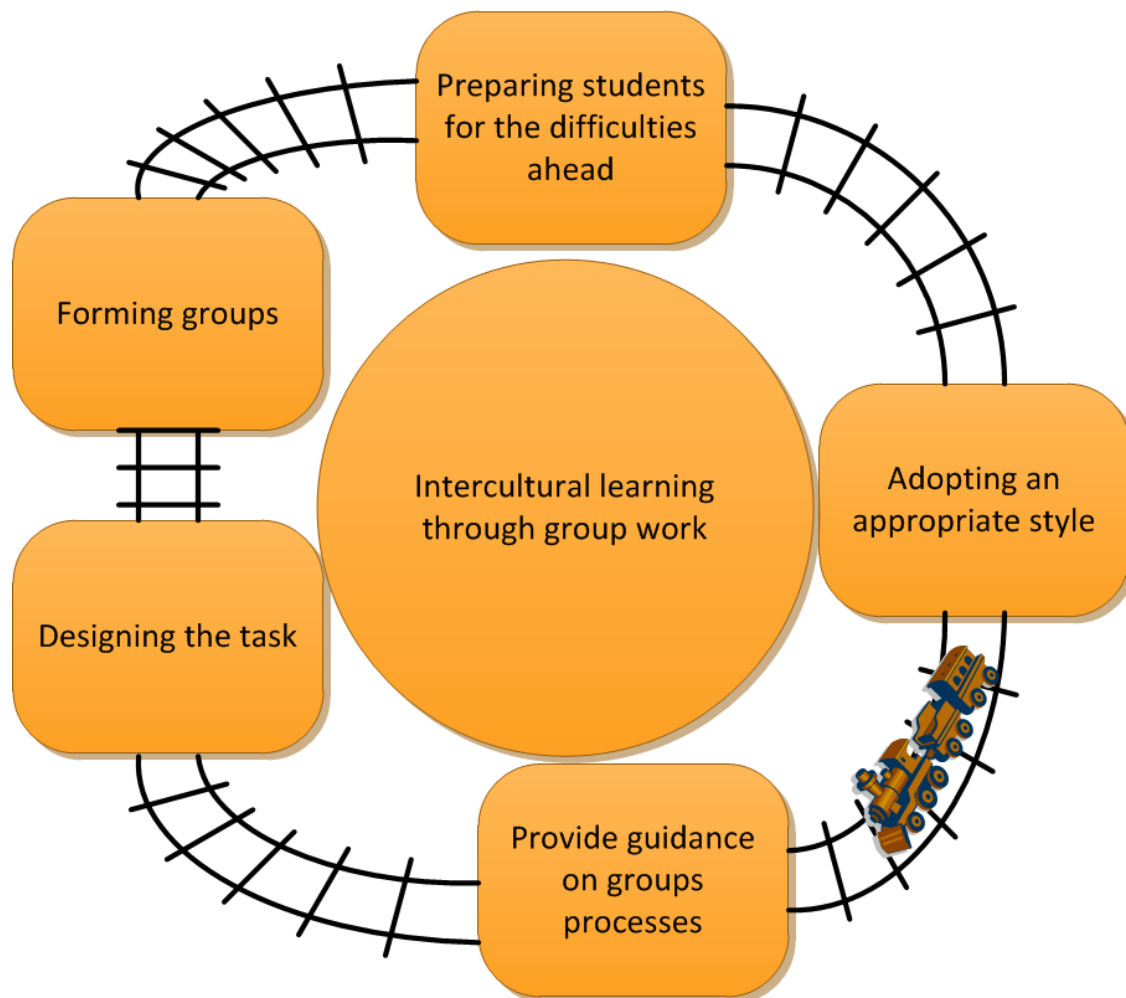
Figure 3: Intercultural learning through group work

TOEFL paper-based score of 4.5 (scale 1-6) in written test and a total score of 575, TOEFL Internet-based score of 20 (scale 0-30) in written test and a total score of 90, Cambridge Certificate of Advanced English, a Bachelors degree from a university where English is the only language of instruction, a pass on English course B (Swedish upper secondary school).

Although the students have passed English test for a certain level, as non-native speaker who use English as their second, third, or even fourth language, many of them still experience difficulties when they first arrive in a foreign country. The research in [11] showed that 76% of the non-native speaking students enrolled in one department at an Australian university were judged to require intensive English language support as based on a writing sample. Besides English writing, according to [12], the students have difficulties in understanding lectures in terms of vocabulary and speed. In fact, international students at various institutions have identified English skills, such as listening ability, oral communication, reading comprehension, vocabulary and writing, as being problematic [9]. In this report, we categorize the language-related problems into four types: listening, speaking, reading and writing. For each type we describe the problems that international students may have and teachers should be aware of, and we discuss possible solutions.

4.1 Listening

International students often have problems with listening to a speaker or lecturer due to their limited vocabulary, the fact that the speaker speaks too fast or in an accent or dialect. Teachers should be aware of those difficulties face by international students, especially those who teach the first year's international class. For better teaching performance, the teachers have responsibility to make some adjustment when they give lectures or talk with international students in and out of classrooms.

How can teachers help students with their listening difficulties? In [9], it gives some suggestions offered by international students in United States:

1. The teachers should speak slowly and clearly. By reducing the speaking speed, the teachers are actually giving the students a chance to perceive and absorb the speech.

2. Repeat key terms and write them on the board. Repeating key terms, writing terms on the board, or preparing a handout can help students follow the lecture. This gives students a baseline to follow if they lose the thread of the discussion.

3. Write homework assignments on the board or use a handout. This is important because the students with trouble in listening may not understand oral assignments, due dates, or changes to assignments, all these things together at the same time. International students are concerned about possibility of missing assignments and losing credit. Remember that asking if everyone understands the assignment may not be enough, since it is embarrassing for international students to ask in public if they do not understand.

4. Provide copies of notes or make clear which sections of the book are being covered in each lecture. Often students including the local ones who do not understand the lecture go home and try to study class materials by reviewing the textbook.

In addition to these four suggestions, we find that when teachers are speaking, it would be good to limit the use of complicated words, construct short sentences, and avoid slangs or colloquial expressions. Whenever a teacher uses more difficult word, simpler terms or definition should be provided, for example, some technical words, which international students may not know in English. Such a way can help students understand lecture and advance their vocabulary [4].

4.2 Speaking

International students view their oral communication skills as a serious impediment to contribute in class and participate in class discussion. There are many substantial explanations for this, most being that international students feel self-conscious if conversational flow does not come easily in the English language [7]. Lack of confidence in oral communication skills keeps the students from speaking up in class. This is a particularly serious problem in seminar classes or oral exams, in which participation is part of course grade.

Suggestions of possible solutions found in [9] are in the following:

1. Provide review questions. Students think in this way they can try to prepare response in advance. However, this is not very practical, since it is often difficult to predict the direction a classroom discussion will take, and prepared responses may be inappropriate.

2. Provide an atmosphere conducive to questions. The teachers should encourage international students to speak up in class but try to avoid embarrassment as much as possible.

3. Give students enough time to reflect. Not everyone think aloud. In some culture, students feel more comfortable to speak up after enough thinking. Allowing enough thinking time, for example, 15 to 20 seconds, can help students participate in class discussion.

In addition, to help international students participate in group discussion, small groups are preferable. Students find it is much easier to speak in a small group than a relatively large group.

4.3 Reading

International students may need much more time to read through materials in English. Considering the extra time they need to spend on reading, teachers should carefully select the text to be studied and discussed in class. If necessary, a glossary with common terms and concepts of the subject should be provided.

4.4 Writing

International students recognize writing as a problem throughout their academic careers. They may experience difficulties with grammar and expressions. Teachers should realize these difficulties, so in evaluation of the students' reports, perfection in writing can not be expected, but certain standards should be set [10]. Before submitting the final reports, proof-reading or peer-review can be helpful. During peer interaction, students can improve their writing skills and communication skills as well. When students evaluate each other's work, additional benefits can occur, such as an increased sense of community and shared responsibility for learning, which could be helpful in integrating.

5 Cultural differences

To better teach international students, teachers have to be aware of cross-culture communication relate issues. International students may come from every part of the world with different religions, cultures and backgrounds. Although globalization makes the world smaller, we still cannot ignore differences between cultures. To describe this problem might be very general, so we choose two typical cultures to analyze: east Asian students and western students.

5.1 Characterization of east Asian students

The most common culture source in East Asia is Chinese culture, where most of students are influenced by old Chinese philosophy, called "the golden mean". The students who are leaded by this philosophy usually do not want to perform very actively in class to attract attention. Additionally, east asian students are likely to experience lack of confidence in their English ability and thus feel ashamed to express their opinions, as described in Sec. 4. Some teachers in western universities judge east asian students to be too quiet in class. Not only Chinese philosophy and lack of confidence influence their performances, but also tradition plays an important role in affecting their behavior. From ancient times in East Asia, mentors and teachers have absolute authority, and every student should obey and respect their teacher unconditionally. Students do not have the right to question their teacher, since the teacher and the student do not have equal rights. There is a famous proverb in Chinese reciting "one day as a teacher, a life as a father"; more than half of Chinese students believe this proverb and rely it. Therefore, in the class they don't want to be critical to the teacher and would like to show their respect to the teacher. Besides the influence from ancient Chinese philosophy, some modern culture, built up after the Second Word War, have strong impact on east asian students' behavior. With the explosive increasing of economy in east asian countries, for instance Japan and Korea since 1960s, and China since 1990s, the populations of these east asian countries have highly

increased. Due to this reason, the competition for the students in east asian countries has become extremely fierce. Under the pressure of competition, most of east asian students tend to work hard and motivate to achieve higher grades.

5.2 Characterization of western students

From their childhood, western students were encouraged to think critically, meanwhile in western culture, teachers are positioned as equal as students, thus, in a typical western class, usually disciples are trained to discuss, even energetically, with lecturers, reaching knowledge through cpmnfrontation rather than from passive hearing. They think university is the starting point for their career and an important life experience, creating networks will provide to be useful in the future, spending a lot of time in social activities as an icebreaker. Hierarchy is regarded as a challenge rather than an impediment, and superiors are always questioned and challenged, and decisions from groups almost always outrank decisions from single superiors, as the essence of democracy.

5.3 Teaching students with different culture

In order to improve cross-culture communication, teachers should at least know where these students are from. Even though equality in education for every student should be emphasized, he/her should pay attention to culture differences among his/her students. Facing the quiet eastern Asian students, teachers could encourage them and make them feel more confident. In the case of active western students, teachers should balance the discussion and lecture sections. In a class mixed with eastern asian and western students, teachers should mix them in the same discussion group. In this way students from two completely different cultures would get benefit from each other, and it is easier for them to integrate.

6 Conclusion

In this work we first presented official statistics from [1] describing quantitatively the presence of international students in Lund University; then, we briefly described mechanisms underlying intercultural friendship formation, sorting out , as in [8], main topics involved; subsequently, we provided few tips from literature for dealing with group separation in classes where international and local students are mixed; after that, we presented issues arising from language barriers experienced by international students, presenting some tips on how to overcome them; finally, we overviewed cultural differences, specifically focusing on differences beetween east asian and western students, from both personal experience and literature.

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