

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS AND CULTURE SHOCK AS A PANACEA FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AMONG NIGERIAN STUDENTS IN RUSSIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

By

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Abstract

This research paper is an exploratory work aimed at investigating social-cultural factors that are problematic to Nigerian students studying abroad using Russia as a case study. The paper critically examines those challenges encountered by Nigerian students in embracing the Russian educational system, as well as an overview of the barriers faced by Nigerian students in terms of understanding lectures, cultural integration, seeking employment, maintaining an active social life, and how these challenges impact their motivation and academic performance. This is with a view to alleviating the language and culture shock among them, so as to enhance academic excellence. The paper has identified language and cultural barriers and has discussed these issues extensively. The paper then gives an in-depth analysis of how these barriers impact academic performance. The paper makes recommendations necessary for the enhancement of academic excellence among Nigerian students studying in Russia.

Keywords: language barriers, culture shock, international students, Nigerian students, Russia

Introduction

Students leaving their countries for another in search for knowledge have existed for decades and this has been a major concern for educational researchers (Ward et al., 2001). Although countless benefits of international education have been enumerated, its social-cultural effects on the recipients could be negative. This phenomenon of having a negative feeling or anxiety while in a foreign country and resulting in the loss familiar cues is known as culture shock (Anderson, 1981).

The preferences for international degrees by Nigerian employers of both the public and private sectors have also fuelled the quest for the acquisition of overseas certificates by Nigerian students. A visit to foreign embassies and high commissions in Nigeria reveals that many of the visa seekers are youngsters who are seeking admission to study in European, American or Asian universities. Many parents go out of their way to ensure that their wards get sponsorship to travel abroad to the extent that universities in neighbouring African countries are also sought after. It is believed that an international degree can almost guarantee entry into Nigeria's growing middle class. For instance, a company looking for an electrical engineer will likely employ one with a certificate from a university abroad than one with a certificate obtained from a Nigerian University. This is due to the assumption that the quality of education acquired abroad is better than the Nigerian standard (Otuogha et al., 2024).

The influx of Nigerian students to Russian universities to acquire undergraduate degrees has come with some communication complexities, given the cultural differences between the Nigerian cultures and the Russian cultures. A first-time visitor to Russia experiences some cultural disparities in language, food, dressing, mannerism and even communication. These cultural variations between the Nigerian and the Russian societies present the international students with some adjustment problems occasioned by the disorientation associated with culture shock as well as language barrier.

Moving to a new cultural environment brings about one of the most traumatic events a person could ever experience as this moment is

accompanied with different difficulties and confusions on what and how to do things which are generally carried out with ease while in the country of birth (Brown, 2009a). Students are challenged to adapt their behavior and values in response to socio-cultural situations in host culture, and they in returns are stimulated to expand their capabilities for cross-cultural communication and intercultural understanding (Yang et al., 2011).

Communication plays a very necessary role in bridging the gap in understanding between people. It has been credited with providing a common ground for people of different orientations, experiences, race and creed to share meanings and oneness. It is through communication that people understand the cultures in other climes adapt to the new environment. Nigerian students in Russia would need to adapt to their new environment for them to succeed in their academic pursuits in that country. For Nigerian students, who came from a culture with distinct communication patterns and social hierarchies, adjusting to the more individualistic and direct communication style prevalent in Russia can be particularly challenging.

Research Objectives

The first objective of this research is to determine the impact of language barriers and culture shock on the academic performances of Nigerian students studying in Russia.

The second objective of this research work is to assess the relationship between language and culture.

In addition, this research shall identify solutions to language barriers and culture shock for optimum academic performances among Nigerian students in Russia.

Hypothesis of the study

H1. Nigerian students will not easily adapt to Russian culture.

H2. Nigerian students in Russia will face a lot of communication problems due to language barriers.

Methodology

Data will be collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is collected from respondents using Questionnaire method for the study. In addition to the primary data, the secondary data collection will be achieved using books, magazines, government reports, media, etc.

Sampling size

50 Nigerian students studying in Russia were interviewed.

Qualitative method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to grasp students' attitudes during their university adaptation. This method allowed us to gain deeper insights into the entirety of students' integration experience and hidden aspects of university life. The interview questions centered on students' previous academic backgrounds, internationalization experiences, and drivers of and obstacles to adaptation. The questions were mostly open-ended, to learn participants' perceptions and interpretations, and their order and specifying details varied for each interview, depending on the interviewees' responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, their duration varied from 30 to 60 minutes.

Analysis and Result

Nigerian students face obstacles, such as language, culture shock, food, etc.

Literature Review

In this article, certain concepts have been employed which may appear confusing to the reader if not properly defined. Here, the author would expatiate these terms for more clarity. The terms include; Language, Nigerian Language, Russian Language, Culture, Nigerian Culture, Russian Culture and Culture Shock.

Language

Language is a structured system of communication that consists of grammar and vocabulary. It is the primary means by which humans convey meaning, both in spoken and signed forms, and may also be conveyed through writing. Human language is characterized by its cultural and historical diversity, with significant variations observed between cultures and across time (Nicholas Evans & Stephen Levinson, 2009). Human languages possess the properties of productivity and displacement, which enable the creation of an infinite number of sentences, and the ability to refer to objects, events, and ideas that are not immediately present in the discourse. The use of human language relies on social convention and is acquired through learning (Language, 2025).

Estimates of the number of human languages in the world vary between 5,000 and 7,000. Precise estimates depend on an arbitrary distinction (dichotomy) established between languages and dialects (Kamusella, 2016). Natural languages are spoken, signed, or both; however, any language can be encoded into secondary media using auditory, visual, or tactile stimuli – for example, writing, whistling, signing, or braille. In other words, human language is modality-independent, but written or signed language is the way to inscribe or encode the natural human speech or gestures (Language, 2025).

Depending on philosophical perspectives regarding the definition of language and meaning, when used as a general concept, “language” may refer to the cognitive ability to learn and use systems of complex communication, or to describe the set of rules that makes up these systems, or the set of utterances that can be produced from those rules. All languages rely on the process of semiosis to relate signs to particular meanings. Oral, manual and tactile languages contain a phonological system that governs how symbols are used to form sequences known as words or morphemes, and a syntactic system that governs how words and morphemes are combined to form phrases and utterances (Language, 2025).

The scientific study of language is called linguistics. Critical examinations of languages, such as philosophy of language, the relationships between language and thought, how words represent

experience, etc., have been debated at least since Gorgias and Plato in ancient Greek civilization. Thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) have argued that language originated from emotions, while others like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) have argued that languages originated from rational and logical thought. Twentieth century philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) argued that philosophy is really the study of language itself. Major figures in contemporary linguistics include Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky.

Language is thought to have gradually diverged from earlier primate communication systems when early hominins acquired the ability to form a theory of mind and shared intentionality (Tomasello, 1996). This development is sometimes thought to have coincided with an increase in brain volume, and many linguists see the structures of language as having evolved to serve specific communicative and social functions. Language is processed in many different locations in the human brain, but especially in Broca's and Wernicke's areas. Humans acquire language through social interaction in early childhood, and children generally speak fluently by approximately three years old. Language and culture are codependent. Therefore, in addition to its strictly communicative uses, language has social uses such as signifying group identity, social stratification, as well as use for social grooming and entertainment (Language, 2025).

Languages evolve and diversify over time, and the history of their evolution can be reconstructed by comparing modern languages to determine which traits their ancestral languages must have had in order for the later developmental stages to occur. A group of languages that descend from a common ancestor is known as a language family; in contrast, a language that has been demonstrated not to have any living or non-living relationship with another language is called a language isolate. There are also many unclassified languages whose relationships have not been established, and spurious languages may have not existed at all. Academic consensus holds that between 50% and 90% of languages spoken at the beginning of the 21st century will probably have become extinct by the year 2100 (Austin & Sallabank, 2011).

Culture

Culture is a concept that encompasses the social behavior, institutions, and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, attitudes, and habits of the individuals in these groups (Tylor, 1871). Culture often originates from or is attributed to a specific region or location (Culture, 2025).

A cultural norm codifies acceptable conduct in society; it serves as a guideline for behavior, dress, language, and demeanor in a situation, which serves as a template for expectations in a social group. Accepting only a monoculture in a social group can bear risks, just as a single species can wither in the face of environmental change, for lack of functional responses to the change. Thus in military culture, valor is counted as a typical behavior for an individual, and duty, honor, and loyalty to the social group are counted as virtues or functional responses in the continuum of conflict. In religion, analogous attributes can be identified in a social group (Culture, 2025).

Culture is considered a central concept in anthropology, encompassing the range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies. Cultural universals are found in all human societies. These include expressive forms like art, music, dance, ritual, religion, and technologies like tool usage, cooking, shelter, and clothing. The concept of material culture covers the physical expressions of culture, such as technology, architecture and art, whereas the immaterial aspects of culture such as principles of social organization (including practices of political organization and social institutions), mythology, philosophy, literature (both written and oral), and science comprise the intangible cultural heritage of a society (Macdonis et al, 2011).

In the humanities, one sense of culture as an attribute of the individual has been the degree to which they have cultivated a particular level of sophistication in the arts, sciences, education, or manners (Williams, 1988). The level of cultural sophistication has also sometimes been used to distinguish civilizations from less complex societies (Childe, 1951). Such hierarchical perspectives on culture are also found in class-based distinctions between a high culture of the social elite and a low culture, popular culture, or folk culture of the lower classes, distinguished by stratified access to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

In common parlance, culture is often used to refer specifically to the symbolic markers used by ethnic groups to distinguish themselves visibly from each other, such as body modification, clothing or jewelry (Hall, 1997). Mass culture refers to the mass-produced and mass-mediated forms of consumer culture that emerged in the 20th century (Storey, 1996). Some schools of philosophy, such as Marxism and critical theory, have argued that culture is often used politically as a tool of the elites to manipulate the proletariat and create a false consciousness (Eagleton, 1983). Such perspectives are common in the discipline of cultural studies (Williams, 1958). In the wider social sciences, the theoretical perspective of cultural materialism holds that human symbolic culture arises from the material conditions of human life, and that the basis of culture is found in evolved biological dispositions (Harris, 1979).

The Concept of Culture Shock

Culture shock was defined as the process of early adjustment to an environment one is not familiar with (Rempel, 2011). This situation occurs when one moves to a foreign country which could either be for a temporary period or otherwise. At this particular time, everything is unfamiliar, both the social environment (etiquette and habitual ways of doing things) as well as the physical settings such as road maps, stores, school environment (Zhou et al., 2008). Basically, it is the anxiety which comes with loss of familiar signs and symbols of social interaction and substituting them with strange ones (Brown et al., 2010). Culture shock is a phenomenon in which an individual experiences problems in adapting to cultures that are different from their own and this is manifested as anxiety, sadness, rejection of host culture and social isolation (Irwin, 2009). At this point, such an individual usually feels odd, lose self-esteem, become confused and miserable feel disoriented and, uncomfortable. It is also the disorientation, discomfort and difficulties people face when confronted with, language, food and accommodation and other social issues in a foreign nation.

Culture shock is an experience a person may have when one moves to a cultural environment which is different from one's own; it is also the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country,

a move between social environments, or simply transition to another type of life (Macionis et al., 2010).

Findings

In the course of this research, thirteen (50) Nigerian students studying in Russia, particularly those in Moscow universities, including; Higher School of Economics, Moscow; Moscow State University; Moscow Humanitarian Economic University; Peoples' Friendship University of Russia; Moscow State Linguistic University, were interviewed. From those interviews, the following findings are made;

Language Barrier

The linguistic ability remains a central index for student adaptation (Ivanova et al., 2018; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Language proficiency is acknowledged to accelerate academic and social integration into university systems (Akanwa, 2015; Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019), as well as socio-economic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes (Piller, 2016). Language difficulties and subjective cultural differences constrain international students' leisure participation more than the study loads (Glass et al., 2014). It is worth keeping in mind that language differences are associated with disruptive effects on communication due to a lack of vocabulary or a difference in accents (Pudelko & Tenzer, 2019). Not surprisingly, language skills among students and the staff were identified as the decisive obstacle to internationalization in emerging countries (Hill et al., 2019). Hence, the literature on mobility and scholar careers has associated language barriers with a low proficiency in organizational language (or, in the current case, English for university staff members) and/or in the country language of the university (Russian for the international students in this study) Pudelko & Tenzer, 2019).

As earlier stated, Nigeria's national language is English language, with hundreds of ethnic and indigenous languages spoken across the nation. English language is the official medium of teaching in all institutions of learning in Nigeria. Nigerians interact with one another in English Language (especially people of different tribes). Even in church, masses/services hold in English (though mass/service is sometimes conducted in indigenous languages from time to time). In

Russia however, the story is totally different!

The major language spoken in Russia is Russian. Even though English language is spoken by some people, and is employed in the teaching of foreign students, the foreign tone evident in pronunciations makes it difficult for Nigerian students to easily comprehend. The consequence of the foregoing is that, Nigerian students in Russia face great communication problems, not only in the academic environment, but also in their daily hassles like shopping, visiting the bank, going to the cinema, restaurant, bar, salon, etc.

Students Friendship Networks

Several studies highlighted the critical role of supportive, social, and friendship networks (Zhou et al., 2008) for student adaptation. These types of relationships provide much-needed social support (Furnham, 2004; Hendrickson et al., 2011), reflect the degree of contact, and eliminate social isolation (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). In the seminal study of Bochner and colleagues (1977), foreign student social networks were classified under three categories: (a) *a co-national network* with compatriots in the host and home countries, established to maintain the original cultural values and behavior (Golubkina et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2008) and to accelerate understanding of a new culture through conversations and intellectual exchange with those who experience similar attitudes (Bittencourt et al., 2021); (b) *a network with host nationals*, such as home-based students, faculty, and counsellors, established to facilitate academic and professional success; (c) *a multi-national network* with non-compatriot international students, established to boost engagement in recreational activities or get advice. Although international students initially prefer interactions with co-nationals (Glass et al., 2014; Guo & Guo, 2017; Zhou et al., 2008), previous studies demonstrated that friendships with people from the host country are universally more valuable to adapting students (Akanwa, 2015; Golubkina et al., 2018; Novgorodtseva & Belyaeva, 2020; Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

Nigerian students in Russia face a great difficulty in befriending their Russian counterparts, and in maintaining active social networks. This is as a result of language barrier, and significant cultural differences.

Food

Food is a huge part of culture and ‘belonging’, not only in the tastes and flavours but also in the rituals and the etiquette. Being distanced from something so ingrained is difficult to adjust to, even the times at which we eat and the prominence we place on certain meals is vastly different from country to country.

Nigerian food offers a rich blend of traditionally African carbohydrates such as yam and cassava as well as the vegetable soups with which they are often served. Maize is another crop that is commonly grown in Nigeria. Praised by Nigerians for the strength it gives, garri is “the number one staple carbohydrate food item in Nigeria”, a powdered cassava grain that can be readily eaten as a meal and is quite inexpensive. Yams are frequently eaten either fried in oil or pounded to make a mashed potato-like yam pottage. Nigerian beans, quite different from green peas, are widely popular. Meat is also popular and Nigerian suya—a barbecue-like roasted meat—is a well-known delicacy. Bushmeat, meat from wild game like antelope and duikers, is also popular. Fermented palm products make a traditional liquor, palm wine, and also fermented cassava. Nigerian foods are spicy, mostly in the western and southern part of the country, even more so than in Indian cuisine. Other examples of their traditional dishes are eba, pounded yam, iyan, fufu and soups like okra, ogbono and egusi. Fufu is so emblematic of Nigeria that it figures in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, for example (Ogbaa, 1999).

Nigeria is known for its many traditional dishes. Each tribe has different dishes that are unique to their culture. Yoruba people, for example, have different dishes like Amala, Ogbono, Moin Moin, Ofada Rice, and Efo Riro (“Culture of Nigeria” 2025).

Russian cuisine has been formed by climate, cultural and religious traditions, and the vast geography of the nation; and it shares similarities with the cuisines of its neighbouring countries. Crops of rye, wheat, barley, and millet provide the ingredients for various breads, pancakes and cereals, as well as for many drinks. Bread, of many varieties, is very popular across Russia. Flavourful soups and stews include shchi, borsch, ukha, solyanka, and okroshka. Smetana (a heavy sour cream) and mayonnaise are often added to soups and

salads. Pirozhki, blini, and syrniki are native types of pancakes. Beef Stroganoff, Chicken Kiev, pelmeni, and shashlyk are popular meat dishes.[183] Other meat dishes include stuffed cabbage rolls usually filled with meat.[184] Salads include Olivier salad, vinegret, and dressed herring (Culture of Russia” 2025).

Nigerian students struggle a great deal in adapting to the Russian dishes on offer. This make them miss home, and as such, it leads to loss of concentration during lectures, resulting to poor academic performances.

Dress Sense

Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups and as a result, a wide variety of traditional clothing styles. In the Yoruba tradition, women wear an iro (wrapper), buba (loose shirt) and gele (head-wrap). The men wear buba (long shirt), sokoto (baggy trousers), agbada (flowing robe with wide sleeves) and fila (a hat). In the Igbo tradition, the men’s cultural attire is Isiagu (a patterned shirt), which is worn with trousers and the traditional Igbo men’s hat called Okpu Agwu. The women wear a puffed sleeved blouse, two wrappers and a headwrap. Hausa men wear barbarigas or kaftans (long flowing gowns) with tall decorated hats. The women wear wrappers and shirts and cover their heads with hijabs (veils) (“Culture of Nigeria” 2025).

Russia is among the coldest countries in the world, with long cold winters, and brief summers. In Russia, clothing is basically done in line with the demands of a particular season, especially for harsh winters. When it’s cold, Russians mostly wear warm coat, scarf and gloves.

Nigerian students in Russia struggle to adapt to this new weather, forcing them to change their styles of dressing in order to survive the harsh climate of Russia. This uncomfortable situation negatively affects academic performance.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings regarding the challenges faced by Nigerian students in pursuit of academic programmes in Russia, particularly as it relates to language barrier and culture shock, the following

recommendations are hereby made;

Firstly, Universities in Russia should foster collaborations with community organizations, Nigerian consular services, and Nigerian cultural associations. Establishing partnerships will provide Nigerian students with external support systems, including community events, cultural gatherings, and relevant resources. This can create a sense of community and a familiar cultural anchor for Nigerian students.

Secondly, Universities in Russia hold the main responsibility for conducting faculty training sessions to raise awareness of the unique challenges faced by international students, particularly regarding culture shock. Institutions should actively listen to verbal and non-verbal cues, avoiding assumptions about communication styles. Clear and concise language is important, with jargon and unfamiliar idioms avoided. Cultural sensitivity to communication style differences, such as directness, is necessary. The universities should train lecturers to be willing to repeat information or clarify concepts. Providing context for unfamiliar topics or concepts is helpful.

Thirdly, Nigerian students in Russia should be encouraged to ask questions in a safe space for clarification.

Fourthly, Russian universities should organize workshops or training sessions that explore cultural norms, customs, and behaviours in Russia. This can help students navigate social situations more confidently and reduce misunderstandings.

Again, Russian universities should develop workshops or support groups that address the psychological and emotional challenges of culture shock. This could involve strategies for building self-confidence and managing anxieties around communication.

Also, cultural education must be thoroughly provided to the students while still in their country of origin. The Federal Government of Nigeria should organize sensitization workshops for Nigerian students intending to travel to Russia, educating them on the language, culture and general information about Russia. This could help reduce culture shock, and enable the students adapt quickly.

In addition, Nigerian students in Russia should actively create social networks with Russian students. This would be of great help in helping them adapt to a new environment.

Another recommendation is that, Russian universities should also create a more welcoming and inclusive environment within the university. This could involve promoting intercultural interaction through events or programs that allow students to connect with faculty and peers from different backgrounds.

Also of great import is that, intending students especially Nigerian students, they must be ready to familiarize themselves with the host culture through reading and asking people that have been in such country questions. Importance of adequate preparation on the side of students to adopt the host culture cannot be overemphasized as this will help them to quickly and easily adapt, and by so doing, culture shock among Nigerian students migrating overseas for study will be totally alleviated.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Nigerian students studying in Russia are rooted in economic factors, cultural adjustment, language barriers, social integration, racism, and the available support systems. Without doubt, Nigerian students experienced culture shock in Russia due to the cultural differences which exist between the two countries. To address these challenges, it is pertinent to develop targeted support programs and policies that aid Nigerian students' integration into the Russian education system.

It is on this note that, the paper has made several recommendations. These recommendations aim to address the linguistic, cultural, psychological, and social factors that hinder communication for Nigerian students experiencing culture shock in Russia and other foreign countries. By implementing such initiatives, universities can create a more supportive environment and promote smoother cultural transitions for their students. This will contribute hugely to a smoother transition, improved academic performance, and enhanced overall well-being for Nigerian students the Russia.

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