

Peer-Reviewed Articles

Language Challenges Faced by International Graduate Students in the United States

Ya-Hui Kuo, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, Taiwan

94101@wtuc.edu.tw

Abstract

Universities and colleges in the United States require international graduate students to provide certain English proficiency documents along with their admission applications before they are admitted to their programs. This study explored the language challenges faced by international graduate students at a Southern university in the U.S. The author also offered recommendations and suggestions to prepare and assist international graduate students in adjusting, adapting, and overcoming their language challenges.

International students who choose to study in America are often the brightest students in their home countries and are also very motivated students (Constantinides, 1992). English proficiency may be particularly problematic for most international students. For example, in China, English is taught more through writing than through a speaking form. As a result, many Chinese students know English grammar and vocabulary better, but have hard time with conversational English (Wan, 2001). International students often have problems understanding lectures, taking notes, taking part in class discussions, and writing papers (Huntley, 1993). These students may also have difficulty understanding American English slang, accents, idioms, and jokes. International students may think that they are incompetent in conversational English to participate in class.

While universities require international students to meet the minimum language proficiency, many of them do not have adequate practice with the verbal usage of English. Antanattis (1990) found that a language deficiency is the major academic obstacle to Asian students who experienced more serious academic difficulties. For example, Jenkins, Jordan and Weiland (1993) found that in science and engineering

more than 25% of students' theses/dissertations were re-written by the faculty themselves. Sharma (1973) also identified the non-European graduate students' academic problems to include giving oral reports, participating in class discussion, taking notes in class, understanding lectures, taking appropriate courses of study and preparing reports. The study of Hagey and Hagey (1974) showed that for overcoming difficulties with the English language, 61% of Middle Eastern students desired to have more time during tests, 50 % desired more explanations while working on test and 43% desired to have lecture notes available.

Belcher's (1994) case study examined the international doctoral student / faculty relationship at the dissertation writing stage. She suggested that mismatches between faculty advisors and students (e.g., students and professors cannot reach an agreement with research and academic English expectations) could partially affect degree completion, job placement, and professional development. Saleh's (1980) study of Arab students' personal, social and academic adjustment problems at North Texas State University, Southern Methodist University and Texas Tech University reported that professors were not considerate of their feelings. In that study, 56.6 percent of the students reported that they had to take courses that they did not want to take.

While participants in Saleh's (1980) study reported that they did not want to take the courses they took, many international students are unaccustomed to the freedom they have in choosing their own courses, thus they may look to their advisors for direction (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986). In addition to the academic stress caused by a lack of conversational English skills, many international students face academic challenges with regards to the instructional methods that are used in American college classrooms. Class participation, especially at the graduate level is expected in American classrooms (Aubrey, 1991).

However, this may be very stressful to students from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa who have been taught to sit in the class quietly, and to take notes while listening to professors. Wan (2001) pointed out that it is regarded as respectful when students listen attentively and quietly to their professors. However, in America, teachers allow students to eat or drink in class, and often, student participation is encouraged or even part of the grade. International students should adjust to the

various accents and teaching styles of the teachers. Students may feel hesitant to participate in the class discussion if they do not understand the lecture (Lin & Yi, 1997) due to the accent or cultural appropriateness of their response.

Kao and Gansneder (1995) surveyed three hundred and fifty-five international students from forty-five countries enrolled in an American University to study why they did not participate in American classroom discussions. Results suggested that cultural factors make Asian students less likely to participate in the class. Parker (1999) studied a group of Taiwanese students who studied at Louisiana Tech University. He found that many of these students felt uncomfortable asking repeated questions even if they did not understand a concept or technique demonstrated by the faculty. Chinese students preferred to be good listeners rather than talkers. They seldom asked questions to their teachers. Similarly, African graduate students preferred being silent and did not use phrases "Excuse me," "What did you say?" and "Can you repeat what you said, please" to ask questions (Antwi and Ziyati, 1993, p. 9).

Many international students also think that to be active in a group discussion is disrespectful. In many countries, if students interrupt professors who are lecturing, it is considered to be impolite and even insulting (Balas, 2000). In many foreign countries, professors dress formally and require students to do the same in class. In America, some professors sit on the desk and dress informally but this is considered offensive in many foreign classrooms. In many American classrooms, the teacher is more interactive, creative and flexible, but to many international students, this approach does not seem to have a structure at all (Wan, 2001). Therefore, to be successful in American classrooms, international students must make a shift from the more formal lecture methods used in their countries and learn more active problem solving, critical thinking and resource skills (Ladd & Ruby, 1999).

International students face learning challenges both inside and outside the classroom. Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) examined four international students' first year college experience in America and found that students lacked computer knowledge. This study further indicated that paper writing was not a common practice outside of the United States. Zain (1965) conducted a study involving 147 international students from 50 non-English speaking counties at the University of Oregon. Zain reported that the largest problems reported by those students were writing essays and reports, participating in

classroom discussions, and taking and organizing notes. The least problems were understanding textbooks, locating information in the library, and understanding lectures. In examination methods, finishing on time in objective tests were the most difficult problems reported by the largest percentages of the students.

In the Payind (1979) study of academic, personal and social problems of Afghan and Iranian students in several institutions in the United States, the most severe academic problems for both groups were completing written examinations in the same length of time as American students do, improving English to the level necessary to pursue academic work, communicating thoughts in English, presenting oral reports, competing with American for high grades, taking notes, and writing reports. The causes of the academic problems, Payind suggests, are related to the lack of proficiency with the English language and, to a certain extent, to the existence of differences between the educational systems at home countries and those of the United States.

Asian students found that completing forms for registration, student aid, or student employment were confusing. The procedures for registration may seem awkward and adding or dropping a course is unusual for them (Jensen & Jensen, 1983).

Methodology

This study included 716 international graduate students pursuing their degrees at a southern university, Alabama, U.S. A survey instrument was used to recruit the participants, and it was sent by the Office of International Education. Within one week after the initial invitation letter was sent out, an e-mail entitled "International Graduate Students Survey" was sent by the Director of the Office of International Education via electronic mail. There were 714 e-mails sent out, but only 152 international graduate students who responded to the structured online survey were returned with a 21.3 % return rate.

Results and Discussion

The major English language challenges faced by the international graduate students in this study were their listening comprehension and oral proficiency. When the English language was mentioned as a challenge, the researcher made the assumption that it might relate to the international graduate students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency. The listening comprehension challenge for international graduate students in the present study was not being able to understand the lectures in classes.

Difficulties in understanding lectures were due to the speed at which the professors talked and their accents. Participants in the study said: “Don't understand what teacher says,” “Difficult to understand their talking, especially terms and phrases,” “Some professors spoke too fast and it was hard to keep following him/her,” “The accent of some of the professors was a challenge for me. I had difficulties understanding them,” and “Coping with the southern accent.” Finally, one participant mentioned that it was “Hard to participate when my fellow classmates discuss some topics. They talk fastly [sic] and unclearly.”

With regard to listening comprehension, many international graduate students stated that they have a hard time understanding what other people say as they believe the southern accent is different from what they are accustomed to and have practiced back home. For example, participants in the study said, “southern accent is difficult to understand.” Another participant added: “Here iam [sic] facing accent problem with english. Eventhough[sic] iam [sic] also studied my studies in english,the [sic] way they pronounce words is different compare to my country.so [sic] for it will take some time to understand their language clearlyand [sic] also to talk in their accent.”

Language is an important and necessary medium of communication. Participants explained, “American can't understand my Englis [sic],” “A little bit of problem with people understanding my accent and me able to understand their ...,” and “... We can talk but the recievers [sic] cannot understand and you have to try in their own way.” Therefore, when communication was mentioned throughout the study as being central to other challenges faced by international graduate students, this led to two assumptions made by the researcher. One possible reason for these communication challenges may be the way in which students learned English in their home country.

Many international graduate students state they feel like children who are powerless and unable to express the thoughts and feelings they have because they are not well-versed using the English language. Not being able to do what they are able to do back home, such as bargaining, shopping, arguing, and communicating can lower international students' self-esteem since they are adults, some of have a very high social economic status in their home country. Communication difficulties might also cause people to look down on them. Some international graduate students in the study indicated that American students

thought they were stupid and not intelligent because they could not express themselves fluently in English. For example, there was one participant in Kuo's (2002) study whose husband protected her (not letting her have opportunities to practice her poor English by taking care of everything from grocery shopping to communicating with others) and this resulted in the fact that she did not have any opportunity to learn how to use the English language. Thus, when she started to go back to school, she felt she was discriminated by her classmates who thought that her poor English was associated with low intelligence.

However, based on the findings of this study, the researcher has also made the assumption that international graduate students' communication and language skills seem to be an important factor contributing to the fact that international graduate students have a hard time making friends with Americans. One participant answered “difficult to communicate with other students” and another admitted “at a party, I could not understand the jokes while Americans [sic] were laughing.” In addition, many participants in Kuo's (2002) study shared that Americans do not have the patience to listen or talk to international students whose English skills are poor. As a result of that, it is the opinion of the researcher that language barriers have created a barrier to building friendships with Americans.

Another possible reason for these communication challenges could be the gap between the two different cultures, or backgrounds. For example, communication and interaction between international graduate students and the academic advisor and/or boss were both listed as challenges in the survey responses. Participants listed such challenges as: “I was hesitant to ask for help with my research problems. I wanted to show him that I could learn on my own and crack these problems,” “communication problem,” and “understand his field and intention.” One participant in the survey expressed “... getting advisors to get on borad [sic] with you timing as an International student.”

Working with graduate students is a very challenging task and it is more demanding to work with international graduate students whose backgrounds are different than the academic advisor and/or boss. After September 11, 2001, there are more regulations and restrictions for international students. For example, F-1 students are required to enroll in at least 9 credit hours to keep their immigration status and international students can only work 20 hours on-campus during the normal semester terms.

Therefore, when one participant expressed "... Getting advisors to get on board [sic] with you timing as an International student" as a challenge, the researcher assumed that the participant tried to tell her advisor that she wanted to finish up her doctoral study before her visa expired or her funding ran out.

Participants in the study recognized other language challenges they have, such as "reading papers in English," "Reading textbook...", "To keep up date with so much reading in my career (rural sociology)," and "some weeks are real rough with lot of deadlines of assignments combined with tests, research etc all at the same time." Since most of the international graduate students were not using English in their field of study, getting used to the terminologies of their field in English textbooks and keeping up with the readings could be challenge. "The new concepts in a different and new language" was a challenge experienced by one participant in the present study. Furthermore, the writing styles and standards might be very different from what international graduate students were used to, and to meet the expectation of different professors can also cause frustration.

Most of the participants in the present study noted that their language challenges were primarily in the classroom or in interacting with other people. However, the author believes that there are more language challenges that international graduate students experience beyond these academic and social areas. For example, an Irania student in the Kuo's (2002) study experienced difficulty communicating with his long distance phone service and credit card company. Another participant from Turkey did not know what to order in the restaurant and she still asked people what the menu items were even though she had been in the United States for a while. In conclusion, English proficiency not only affected these international graduate students academically, but also contributed to their social, cultural, and personal adjustment.

Conclusions

The standardized test scores of international graduate students do not ensure that they are not going to experience language challenges once they arrive on campus in the U.S. Students are required to understand classroom interaction and other communications no matter how good they were on the tests (TOEFL/IELTS/GRE). Kuo (2001) pointed out that TOEFL scores only showed how well one performs in the English language, not in one's academic area. English test score are not good predictors of the academic success. There are a lot of English training courses and programs targeted to help students

pass the standardized exams overseas. However, these programs do not focus on developing the language skills that students need to participate and study at an American university. As a result, there are a lot of Asian students who have high scores on the TOEFL, but still experience an enormous amount of difficulty with their oral and listening comprehension.

The lack of field based English terminology might result difficulty in reading for foreign students. In many foreign countries, English is not a medium of instruction and students do not have enough expose to English communication. International graduate students should learn the terminology related to their college work and outside such as: Opening a bank account, visiting physicians, fixing cars, ordering food in restaurants, or even getting a haircut. Before coming to the United States, international graduate students should try to have some training in listening comprehension or gain some type of access to the way that people speak in the United States or in the regions where they will be studying.

Another suggestion that international graduate students should take into consideration is to enroll in the classes in their fields that are taught by American professors while they are still at home. This will provide practical interaction with native speakers in learning field terminologies, understanding the American education system and culture. If there is no such opportunity available, international graduate students could try to find an opportunity to work in American companies or even to get involved in schools, adult learning centers, libraries and churches. In short, international graduate students should ask themselves if they are well-prepared in communicating in the English language and can adjust to the different accents and word usages before arriving to the U.S.

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About the Author:

Ya-Hui Kuo earned her PhD in Educational Psychology from Auburn University. Currently she teaches at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, Taiwan.

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