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University professors' perceptions of international student needs

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Keywords

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Abstract

The number of international students is increasing rapidly and impacting teaching and learning at colleges and universities (Anayah & Kuk, 2015). While many international students successfully complete their degrees, others face challenges due to a lack of academic, cultural and linguistic understanding. This study reports the results of a survey that examines the perspectives of 89 North American university professors regarding international students' linguistic and academic needs in preparation for university. The survey findings revealed that international students' limited English proficiency hinders them from succeeding at university. The results also show that international students need to develop a better understanding of American classroom culture.

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Introduction

Matriculated international students are often stranded as they seek to earn high grades but lack the necessary academic, cultural, and linguistic skills to be successful at U.S. academic institutions. They encounter many challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences as they make the transition to a new academic life. In addition to these challenges, international students also face social pressure from their families and governments to complete their degrees and return to their home country. University professors might not be familiar with these linguistic, academic, and social struggles of international students, which creates a gap between students' needs and professors' expectations. Such a gap hampers international students from succeeding at U.S. universities.

For international students to overcome these challenges, universities and colleges need to understand the aforementioned obstacles to offer accurate and helpful support. To make this support possible, we must understand university professors' perceptions of international students' academic and linguistic needs. The purpose of this study was to collect baseline data to investigate the perceptions of university professors of international students' needs to inform English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum, better meet international students' academic and linguistic needs, and support university faculty.

Review of literature

Professors and international students: addressing the perception gap

The number of international students in U.S. higher education has increased dramatically in the last twenty years (Wu et al., 2015). They struggle in the areas of academic knowledge, English language proficiency, and workload management (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Myles & Cheng, 2003). These academic and linguistic barriers might preclude them from progressing successfully through university.

Some studies investigated professors' views on having international students in their classes. According to Barber and Morgan (1984), 87% of faculty reported that their academic expectations were the same for both domestic and international students. Jin and Schneider's (2019) findings revealed 76% of faculty reported that international students contributed to the diversity of the university, and 28% said that international students did better in their classes than other students. In response to the challenges faculty faced, the findings showed that 45% indicated international students had low language skills and 24% reported international students were not accustomed to the U.S. academic culture (Redden, 2018).

In a similar study by Fallon and Brown (1999), 87% of faculty indicated limited language proficiency of international students and 89% of faculty reported their positive experiences working with international students. Trice's (2003) survey showed that faculty thinks limited language

skills are the major challenge facing international students. Similarly, in Unruh's (2015) study, student's lack of required language proficiency and faculty's unfamiliarity of diverse cultures continue to be challenging for faculty.

Challenges impacting international students' success

International students often struggle to adjust to U.S. university life due to language barriers (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). Miscommunication or inability to communicate with American peers and professors affects students' academic success at university. Researchers have found that international students and professors struggle to communicate with each other (Teriu, 2012; Beoku-Betts, 2004). Teriu (2012) claimed that international students are inclined to pretend that they understand their American classmates at university when in fact they do not because of their low language proficiency. Also, international students might feel nervous when talking to their American classmates, which makes them unwilling to share their ideas in class (Lin & Scherz, 2014).

In addition to language barriers, unfamiliarity with the U.S. classroom culture is another obstacle that many international students face in American universities. While U.S. colleges and universities, for instance, value the critical analysis of academic work (Miekley, 2014), some international students might not be accustomed to reading critically, analyzing and evaluating ideas. Additionally, international students often find paraphrasing, quoting and citing difficult to learn. According to McDonnell (2004), quoting and paraphrasing according to U.S. standards are challenging skills to develop by English language learners even with provided training. This often results in varying forms of plagiarism, particularly many students are from cultures and backgrounds where copying information is an acceptable academic practice (McDonnell, 2004). Each culture has its own definition and understanding of what paraphrasing and plagiarism mean (Adiningrum & Kutieleh, 2011). This results in a lack of universal agreement on a definition of plagiarism. Thus, what is accepted in one culture may not be in another culture (Leask, 2006, Adiningrum & Kutieleh, 2011). That is, some cultures see copying others' work without referring to the original source as a sign of showing appreciation to the original author (Hyland, 2001). Hazlitt (1998) said that sharing homework and answers is a common practice for Mexican students; Korean students are encouraged to mimic and not produce; Japanese students value collaboration. Undoubtedly, these practices "impede an easy transition to acceptance of Western anti-plagiarism values and practices" (McDonnell, 2004, p.4).

In brief, the studies showed language and academic skills are demanding skills for many international students. Given the importance of research on understanding international students' linguistic and academic needs, conducting research on the perceptions of university professors on international students' needs would seem to be essential. Therefore, the results of this survey were used to add to our understanding of the linguistic and academic challenges international students face at university. Accordingly, this study aims

to examine the perceptions of university professors on international students in two areas: (1) students' language and academic needs at university, (2) professors' suggestions for assisting international students at university based on these perceptions.

Study design

Participants

For this study, professors across multiple departments at a U.S. university completed a survey to investigate the linguistic and academic needs of international students. Approximately 862 faculty members were surveyed at a university in the northwest region of the U.S. through a daily e-mailed university newsletter. Approximately 10% of the sample, or 89 respondents, completed the survey, using Qualtrics survey software. Respondents represented a variety of fields including agriculture, art, architecture, business, education, engineering, law, humanities, natural resources, and hard sciences. The majority of respondents in this research hailed from fields in the humanities (32%) and life sciences (20%), with 16% from business. In terms of teaching levels, 21% of respondents teach 100 level courses, 15% teach 200 level courses, 22% teach 300 level courses, 26% teach 400 level courses, and 17% teach 500 level courses.

The university faculty had previous experience teaching students with varying L1 backgrounds: 19% of respondents have taught Arabic speaking students, 25% have taught Chinese speakers, 9% Japanese, 10% Korean, 8% Portuguese, and 17% Spanish. A low percentage indicated teaching students with language backgrounds in Europe, Southeast Asia, Nepal, and India.

Data collection

In order to obtain in-depth information from the participants, we developed a survey questionnaire with closed-ended and open-ended questions. The survey included a 14-item, 6-point Likert-style questionnaire, ten quantitative closed-ended questions, and an open-response question. The questionnaire items included questions about the professors' teaching styles, assessment methods, and writing assignments as well as international students' language and academic needs. The participants were also asked about their views on how to better serve international students studying in American universities. The survey was open to collect responses for four weeks.

Data analysis

We collected data using a questionnaire. We used Qualtrics software to administer and analyze the closed-ended questions. Percentages of the responses of the closed-ended questions were presented as descriptive statistics. The open-ended responses were used to provide a deeper analysis of the quantitative data (Payant, 2016). The researchers selected illustrative quotes from the participants' open-

ended responses to support the descriptive statistics and also to illustrate the participants' suggestions in regard to preparing non-native English speakers for academic and linguistic success at the university.

Results

We organized the results into two categories: (1) academic and language needs, and (2) participants' suggestions.

Section 1: academic and language needs of L2 learners

The participants were asked to identify the common academic and language skills they expect international students to utilize. The most common academic and language skills faculty expect students to understand were as follows: E-mail (25%), Skill Application (19%), Group Projects (19%), Peer Learning (17%), and Short Essay (14%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Academic and language skills

| Learning skills | Total percentage |
|-------------------|------------------|
| e-mail | 25% |
| skill application | 19% |
| group projects | 19% |
| peer learning | 17% |
| short essay | 14% |

One participant reported that "Chinese students have a really hard time answering short essay questions on my exams. They can do numerical problems, but they cannot do writing almost at all." Another participant shared: "Please teach students writing and communication skills." There was evidence that some believed that international students have limited English writing and speaking skills that might hold students back from making progress in class.

Faculty also recommended additional learning skills for language learners to develop before matriculating to university. These included critical thinking (25%), note taking (15%), and content vocabulary (15%). One of the participants stated, "I often have to clarify certain words, so they can understand the question, which indicates they need to learn more vocabulary." One participant noted, "It would save a lot of effort if you taught people the benefits of studying in groups, of taking notes, or first recording lectures, and then transferring that to notes."

Participants also identified other academic and language needs of international students. Participants responded to questions about the academic challenges they observed teaching L2 learners. They indicated that international students have an inadequate understanding of the American classroom culture, which embraces regular class attendance, clarification questions for better comprehension, active student participation in class and group study, academic honesty, critical thinking and taking responsibility of their learning. For example, one participant remarked, "Teach them that it is considered a compliment to ask questions about what the teacher said, it is not disrespectful or a sign of weakness." Participants reported that although they

encourage international students to come to classes on a regular basis so that they can benefit from class discussions and materials, they do not usually do so: "They [the students] rarely attend classes and tend to show up near grading events with the expectation that the faculty will direct them personally step-by-step through the procedure."

Some participants shared how difficult it was for international students to take part in class discussions and how this could be a challenge to university faculty. One participant wrote: "One of the many challenges I notice with international students is lack of willingness to participate in the class. Unless they are asked to do so, many remain quiet throughout the class. Given the various cultural backgrounds they come from, I am sure it is hard for them at the beginning."

Participants also shared that L2 learners struggle with academic honesty, knowing the implications and understanding citation rules. One participant commented: "I provide notice in my syllabus and in the term paper guidelines as to the effect plagiarism will have on a student's grade in the course and reporting the incident to the Dean of Students. Yet, these students still plagiarized, which undermines the integrity of the academic institution."

The results also showed students' struggle to meet university expectations such as taking ownership of learning and thinking critically from a U.S. academic perspective. In addition, the faculty observed note-taking and critical thinking skills as other areas of challenge for L2 learners. L2 learners do not readily evaluate definitions, understand and solve, predict and analyze with logical reasoning. One participant argued: "students must be able to understand and follow spoken and written directions including those related to course requirements, understand and take notes from in-person and online lectures, understand, evaluate and solve applied problems."

Respondents identified another language need of L2 learners such as interpersonal communication skills by e-mail or in person. A participant noted, "often, students appear painfully shy. If students don't speak up, though, it's difficult to know if they are understanding the material," while another participant described the challenge they had in class as follows: "Many of my L2 students have poor speaking skills."

Section 2: participants' suggestions

Most participants suggest providing international students with training concerning American classroom expectations. The participants suggested discussing the differences and similarities between cultures. One of the participants suggested: "They [students] could benefit from detailed training on the educational culture at the college level in the U.S., e.g., how to correspond with the faculty, what is expected from them in and out of the classroom, how to engage in team projects, how to engage in classroom discussions, how much to study, their responsibilities as students, plagiarism, and misconduct, etc."

Other participant faculty highlighted the need to support international students by having them work with domestic or international students to help them adjust to American academic life. For instance, one of the participants wrote, "if there is native language speakers within the college to support the English-as-a-second-language speakers then the foreign students can begin work within their major sooner." Participants also expressed interest in collaborating with other departments and colleges to assist international students. One participant pointed out, "I am happy to initiate an encouragement workshop for them, or if you already have such activities, I would love to be a part of it."

Discussion and implications

The survey findings revealed a need for international students to improve their interpersonal communication skills, and to develop a better understanding of U.S. classroom culture and academic systems, academic conduct and course activity norms, which align with what previous studies found. One major academic and language challenge professors shared was international students' low level of verbal English proficiency. Faculty reported students struggle to understand lectures, class discussions, and announcements. We could infer that students' lack of experience in content areas could be due to the students' difficulty understanding professors' verbal communication. International students have most likely studied English in their home country or in intensive English programs that focus on teaching language through different content themes that do not necessarily relate to the students' field of study. Also, students might not have been exposed to professors with different accents, which might hinder international students from understanding the professors' verbal communication. According to Sewell (2005), students might not be able to communicate with others or understand materials because of accents they are not used to.

International learners' lack of academic and language skills could be attributed to their low English proficiency (Zarei & Haghgoo, 2012). Students' limited language proficiency could explain why international students tend to plagiarize. If a student cannot understand the reading text, there is no way for the student to paraphrase it and therefore the student finds plagiarism as a solution to meet class deadlines. Our findings confirm the literature, as faculty reported international students not performing well in class because of cultural differences and unfamiliarity with American classroom culture (Marambe et al., 2012).

The results of our study also fall in line with literature regarding English language learners and the U.S. academic value of critical thinking. Many international students come from cultures where sharing critical thought is not encouraged (Zarei & Haghgoo, 2012); thus, they might not feel comfortable using these skills in any academic setting. Also, some international students might pass to the university by taking standardized English exams that do not necessarily prepare them for university environments.

Our findings show that U.S. professors appear to be aware of

the challenges international students face. Their suggestions demonstrate they are conscious of solutions to support their international students in the classroom. However, the lack of support to the faculty might be an issue. The results of this survey could help open communication between faculty across university to find ways to support international students. Some of the participants in this study suggested and were willing to partake in workshops and training that address the language and academic needs of international students. These professional development activities might include workshops, focus groups, or discussion sessions that highlight the challenges and solutions professors face in teaching international students. Such professional development opportunities would prepare faculty to work with students with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. Additionally, they would encourage university departments to reallocate their resources to meet the needs of international students and make necessary changes that help prepare international students for U.S. academic life.

Conclusion

This study sought to better understand the views of university professors on the needs of international students. The findings of this study can help universities reflect on and reevaluate the resources they have on campus to support the learning process of international students and to better assist students in adapting to American higher education norms and conventions.

The needs of students, as identified by faculty participants, were grouped under two common categories: linguistic and academic. It is clear that language proficiency and inadequate academic preparation both affect international students' success at university. Additionally, students' culture and educational background are factors that might affect international students' knowledge of the U.S. education system.

The challenges international students face need to be considered by U.S. colleges if they want to continue serving international students effectively (Wu et al., 2015). Students who are surrounded by a supportive environment are more satisfied with their university experience (Korobova & Starobin, 2015). To better meet students' academic needs, it would be accommodating to create groups outside the university boundaries to give international students the opportunity to interact with their American peers (Mamiseishvili, 2012). Another important factor to consider helping international students adapt to the new culture is to design intercultural courses (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Such courses facilitate communication between international students and their American peers and professors. Also, Sutherland-Smith (2005) urges universities to reassess the way they handle the issue of plagiarism and take into consideration where the students come from. By considering these resources, we believe this present study will help university faculty and those in higher education better serve their international students.

Limitation and future research

Our study presents a number of limitations. First, we conducted this study at only one medium-sized public university and received a low response rate from faculty, so we cannot generalize the results of this study to all fields of study or all universities and colleges. Second, we were not able to indicate distinctions between students who previously studied in intensive English versus those who met minimum language requirements through other means (i.e. standardized tests).

We recommend future research that has a larger participant pool from all departments and at multiple higher education institutions. A study could look at differing needs of English language learners within varying fields of study, or another study could review collaboration between intensive English programs and other academic departments. Also, researchers could compare how universities with differing resources and teaching practices impact the learning experience of international students. Another informative research could examine the role of intensive English programs (IEPs) in preparing international students for university.

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