

Let All Voices Be Heard: Exploring International Students' Communication Challenges in the Internationalized Classroom

Xi Yu

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, United States

Bethany Peters

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, United States

ABSTRACT

In many cases, faculty and staff are unaware of the unique challenges that international students experience in classrooms, and teaching priorities may not be aligned with the learning needs. To address the gap in perspectives between students and faculty/staff, this focus group study involved international students, staff, faculty and instructors. The purpose is to identify barriers that international students face in cross-cultural interaction and develop strategies that faculty and staff can use to provide effective support. The study reveals multi-layered challenges that cross-cultural transition and language barriers can create for international students, and roles of domestic students in cross-cultural interactions. The resulting discussion highlights teaching and advising strategies that faculty/staff can employ to enhance the learning experience for international students.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Communication, Cross-cultural Interaction, International Students, International Student Advising, Intercultural Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, providing students with learning opportunities that will further develop their intercultural competencies is an invaluable component of a college education (Lee, Poch, Shaw, & Williams, 2012). While many types of educational activities may help to foster these skills, the presence of international students in classrooms across the U.S. increases the chances for all students to learn and engage with diverse perspectives. When provided with structured opportunities, American students can learn valuable information about international students' home cultures, and international students can contribute unique insights to the learning process (Leask, 2009). In U.S. classrooms, discussion-based and student-oriented teaching styles dominate; however, these active learning approaches are not necessarily familiar to some international students (Smithee, Greenblatt, & Eland, 2004). Even though international students may be aware of this difference prior to their arrival, in practice, it is not intuitive to shift to a different mode of teaching and learning (Yu, Isensee, & Barbara, 2016). To assist international students with their transition to U.S. campuses, faculty and staff need to make time to deepen their understanding of the uniqueness of international students' prior experiences and diverse learning styles. With strategic support from faculty and staff, students from all backgrounds can benefit by increasing their intercultural knowledge when they have opportunities to interact more effectively across language and cultural barriers.

Research Questions

To gain a greater understanding of communication challenges that international students experience and how faculty and staff try to support students to navigate those challenges, this study aims to answer two main research questions outlined below. These research questions were also evolved after reviewing the findings from previous research completed at the same institution (Peters & Anderson, 2017).

1. What factors contribute to the communication and interaction challenges that international student experience?
2. What strategies do students, faculty, and staff identify as important in providing support to international students?

METHOD

Focus group methodology was selected to provide in-depth and elaborated perspectives to explore the research questions. This study is approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) where the authors work at.

Participants were recruited and selected considering their demographic background and colleges/offices they are at.

Table 1: Overview of focus group participants

Participant Type	Number of Participants	Number of Focus Groups
International Students	18	3
Teaching Assistants	9	2
Instructors and Faculty	13	3
Staff	30	5
Totals	70	13

Focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. Focus group questions were tailored slightly to fit the population represented by each focus group (international students, teaching assistants, instructors & faculty, and staff). Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and were co-facilitated by the authors. All focus groups were audio recorded upon permission. Detailed notes about participants' responses were also recorded during each session.

Once all the focus group sessions were complete, the audio recordings were transcribed by an outside transcription service, rev.com. Transcriptions were imported into Excel and the researchers then used an open coding process to analyze the transcriptions. This involved first analyzing each sentence of the interview transcripts, and then choosing to assign a code to a segment that held meaning relevant to the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). After analyzing the transcripts at the sentence level using this method, the two researchers agreed upon categories by reviewing the relationships between codes or clusters of similar codes (Shank, 2006). As a final step, broader themes were identified that corresponded to our research questions (Yin, 2014).

FINDINGS

In this study, student participants discussed the challenges of learning how to use academic English in interactive classrooms and described the cultural barriers they faced. Participants from all focus groups emphasized peer interactions, particularly with U.S. peers, as a primary area of concern. Faculty and staff participants also discussed concerns about various

difficulties with referring students to campus resources, including knowing which resources would be helpful for students among other challenges. Specific themes related to each research question are described below, with selected quotes provided.

Research Question 1: What factors contribute to the communication and interaction challenges that international student experience?

Theme 1a: The challenges international students experience are multi-layered, meaning they encounter barriers related to both language and culture, as well as many other factors. Some faculty and staff participants did not always attribute the barriers that students experienced to primarily one challenge - instead, in many cases they described a “multi-layering of things” that often creates compounded barriers for students. For example, if the challenge students are experiencing is primarily related to language barriers or cultural difficulties, it may also be impacted by emotional stress, previous educational preparation, financial limitations, mental health concerns, and pressures from family, among other things.

“But it's emotional for them, like every time, every second. Like when they mispronounce something, or you know, every moment of that navigation is emotional, to recognize and, and work with that. But I think it needs to be though, because living in a different country with different languages it's a traumatic experience in some ways. And it's a mental drain for trying to understand everything” (Staff participant).

“There's some intersection, I think, between cases of this type and family pressures. When you talk to students, you hear students describe a lot of pressure, family expectations back home and, graduation timelines, and visa timelines, such concerns about completing a program. It can cause heightened anxiety, it can cause plagiarism, but it can also complicate the resolution process too” (Faculty participant).

Student participants explained that they experienced the most intense language barriers when they first arrived in the U.S. Some students discussed speaking in academic settings (presentations, discussions, and other interactions) as their most difficult challenge, and several highlighted how difficult it can be to learn and use academic vocabulary. Similar to perception of faculty and staff participants, when comparing language and cultural barriers, many students perceived cultural barriers to be more complex and more integral to their ability to form successful social networks. Some students commented that improving their language proficiency was more straightforward because they could identify opportunities to practice, but

acclimating to culture and developing their sociocultural knowledge took a longer time and more ambiguous.

“After a while I think most of us here speak pretty good English and don't have such problems anymore. Then after that, it's more of a culture thing I think. People who grow up here like, how they party is different from the way we hang out. And I cannot make conversations with them about those TV shows and songs they grew up with” (Student participant).

Theme 1b: Navigating campus bureaucracy is challenging.

Faculty and staff participants described a range of challenges they perceive students to have when acclimating to various expectations in the campus environment, including navigating administrative policies, the advising system, and classroom expectations; finding a supportive network; and identifying and using the appropriate supporting resources. Representative quotes include:

“When students, particularly international students, first come to campus, they are arriving right before school starts, when course selection is at its worst with additional processing time. If they are transfer students or a new freshman from another country from a non-native English-speaking country, it is very challenging to register in a timely manner” (Staff participant).

“I think that admissions and the colleges and departments need to do a better job of helping students navigate that process, which is often times having to be compressed into a three-day period. We're advising them on Friday, and then they're having to decide what classes they're going to take on the following Tuesday after Labor Day. That's bewildering for anybody, let alone somebody who has these additional challenges to negotiate” (Faculty participant).

Theme 1c: Cross-cultural communication is a “two-way street”.

Faculty and staff described challenges they observed in students' cross-national interactions both in and out of the classrooms. While there was some discussion about the tendency that international students have to segregate into monocultural groups, participants also expressed concerns about the need to better prepare domestic students to interact with international students.

“I don't know what to do to make domestic students nicer and more inclusive. I wish they'd just not be ignorant” (Staff participant).

“There is clearly a cultural difference in how they [international students] engage in groups. Their comfort level with their English exacerbates that issue significantly. So, they typically are more likely to sit back and observe and not interject and participate until the other team members have built some relationships, which some of the [domestic] students aren’t very good at. They’re very task focused and so I try and coach them, you know, to do more of that” (Faculty participant).

“When you work in a group, others [domestic students] are working and talking fluently. And I can’t interrupt them, or to slow down the whole process as a group. So, I never stop them, and I am just following quietly” (Student participant).

Research Question 2: What strategies do students, faculty, and staff identify as important in providing support to international students?

Theme 2a: Facilitate a connection among international students with other students. Faculty, staff, and student participants discussed the importance of creating "a connection with students" as a key strategy for support. Sub themes include creating peer mentoring opportunities, intentionally assigning mixed small groups to promote interaction and participation in class, and even structuring "forced interactions" when necessary as a way to help students become more comfortable interacting with each other over time.

“In the context of those group discussions, I think they probably feel less comfortable speaking up. It’s reduced by a little bit when you put them into smaller groups. They’ll have groups of three or four in which they work on projects and workshop and talk with one another. In that context I think people talk a lot more freely and can make progress” (TA participant).

“In my classes for group work, if you let them choose their groups, all of the Chinese students go to one group, right, and then, you know, you get the other group over here, and you get the athletes over there. I have to forcibly mix them up, and don't allow them to form their own group” (Faculty participant).

Theme 2b: Build trust with students. Some TA and staff participants described the importance of building trusted relationships in faculty-student and staff-student interactions. These participants described the importance of communicating in a way that demonstrates care, compassion, and investment in student success. A few students also

mentioned the important and ways that faculty and staff could build a trusted relationship during teaching and advising.

“It’s a balance because it’s putting pressure on students but also I find that when I meet with students, they see that I care. I always tell my students that it doesn’t make me happy to see you not succeed. It doesn’t give me any pleasure to give a failing grade. When I say those types of things, then they know that I’m rooting for them. It also helped plant a seed for my students being responsible, being accountable, and not hesitate seeking out learning resources from me” (TA participant).

“I really want them to do well, and I tell them, I’m investing in your success, really like a family member. Not just saying it, but acting that way, and they really feel for it, and then they’re gonna listen to what I have to say and probably follow my advice because they trust me” (Staff participant).

Theme 2c: Normalize language development progress and help-seeking. Faculty and staff participants described that successful international students as those who were persistent in their determination to overcome language, cultural, or other barriers. Some expressed concern that a reluctance to ask for help would limit students’ abilities to be successful in their academics. Specific perspectives that help to illustrate this concept of student self-advocacy include the willingness to ask questions, identifying and using campus resources, recognizing that it is okay to make mistakes, and confidence in their individuality and strengths. Many participants discussed about ways to normalize help-seeking for all students. A few TAs also highlighted their belief that all students were learning the language of their discipline, and how this realization helped to reframe how they viewed all students’ contributions in class.

“I was always told that the best students are the ones who are asking for help. Professors on campus are encouraging it, and they are happy to see you asking questions and trying and wanting to do well. I think that’s maybe a distinction that I’ve seen among students” (TA participant).

“The ones that are not afraid to say, ‘I do not understand,’ or, ‘Can you tell me again?’ or will come back the next day and ask the same questions are the ones that succeed. I think depending on where they’re from, they probably don’t have the habits asking or saying that they need help or dealing with a lot of emotional and mental transition” (Staff participant).

Theme 2d: Guide international students using to better utilize campus resources. Participants discussed different ideas for how to increase resource awareness at the faculty and staff level, such as visiting department meetings, brown bag lunch sessions, etc., to get to know more about international student’s ever-changing needs and how to assist with their success and wellness. TAs and faculty explained their methods for referring students to resources in a mindful way considering international student’s cultural background. In general, students described their appreciation for various resources on campus, and expressed receptivity to resource referrals if they could tell that faculty were genuinely trying to be helpful and caring.

“I think one of the barriers for me was knowing where to direct them if it wasn’t my skill set. I only suggest the available resources I can do to suggest. But it took me a lot of time searching to find those sources. Our course coordinators don’t like to make those super readily available to us” (TA participant).

“One thing that is an issue is to figure out where to send students for support. I’d like a list of resources, like if you have non-native speakers who has a paper assignment, here’s a resource to help them... I’d like the resources sent by emails straight to faculty” (Faculty participant).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Faculty and staff will be better prepared to support international students when they are more aware of the “multilayered” factors that influence students’ experiences. As some staff participants described, the challenges that international students face are complicated and compounded by many possible variables, such as emotional stressors associated with cultural transitions, the tedious and exhausting experience of studying in a second language, navigating unfamiliar academic expectations, and the difficulties of trying to establish a new support network. Student participants illustrated these multilayered challenges when they expressed anxieties about their confidence levels, speaking proficiency, and their ability to negotiate cultural and social dynamics in group discussions.

All students may benefit from resources and training that prepares them to interact more effectively across language and cultural barriers. Student participants expressed that one of their greatest challenges, beyond even the difficulties of learning and using academic English, was interacting with U.S. peers and navigating group dynamics. International students have frustrations from U.S. students’ lack of interest in getting to know them or including them in group discussions. TA, staff, and instructors echoed these

concerns, stating from observations that U.S. students often seem to lack of motivation when engaging with international students in classroom or co-curricular settings. Students explained that while they could identify tangible strategies to improve their English, and time spent in the culture facilitated this, some found it harder to navigate discussions and social interactions that required cultural insider knowledge.

Critically important, simply advising students to improve English will likely not resolve the challenges they face. Students also need support to overcome cultural differences. The cultural differences are not only in forms of language or accent, but also can be reflected on how international students prefer to participate in classes, how they engage with faculty and peers, and how they might seek help when needed. Faculty and staff need to make efforts to deepen understanding of diverse cultural values that international students bring to campus and learn how to work with proficiently with students from various backgrounds. Suggestions for faculty and instructional staff to cope with cultural variance in classrooms may include providing explicit academic expectations, incorporating a variety of ways to present learning materials, facilitating opportunities for meaningful interactions among students and instructors, and being patient and allowing time for non-native English speakers to practice and grow by providing exemplary performance (Carnegie Mellon University, 2014).

Students may become more confident self-advocates and better “navigate campus bureaucracy,” if faculty and staff can develop supportive subcultures in which language development and support-seeking are normalized. Self-advocacy behaviors named by faculty and staff participants included asking questions regularly, using resources proactively, and finding opportunities to network and be involved. Considering the effort students may need to exert when navigating various forms of campus bureaucracy, and the compounding influence of culture and language difficulties, international students may benefit from faculty and staff advocates who seek to minimize barriers and normalize help-seeking.

It is also clear that resource awareness is a high priority for faculty and staff. More strategic and comprehensive outreach from offices that offer support to international students could be helpful to address this gap. Furthermore, faculty and staff may also need to identify new ways of communicating to both colleagues and students about resources.

In conclusion, institutions shall systemize and customize supporting resources taking international students’ needs into account. A starting point is to get to know our international students, as well as at an individual level without any assumption knowing that they are all from different parts of the world and they might be quite different even if they are from the same country. Recognizing international students’ contributions to U.S. campuses and assisting international students perceived academic challenges is a shared responsibility for the institution and all people on our campus.

REFERENCES

- Carnegie Mellon University (2014). *Recognizing and addressing cultural variations in the classroom*. Retrieved from <http://tlcp.depaulia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/05/CarnegieMellonRecognizingandAddressingCulturalVariationsintheClassroom.pdf>
- Leask, B. (2009). Using formal and informal curricula to improve interactions between home and international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(2), 205-221.
- Lee, A., Poch, R., Shaw, M., & Williams, R. (2012). *Engaging Diversity in Undergraduate Classrooms: A Pedagogy for Developing Intercultural Competence: ASHE Higher Education Report, Volume 38, Number 2*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Peters, B. & Anderson, M. (2017). *Supporting Non-Native English Speakers at the University of Minnesota: A Survey of Faculty & Staff*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Minnesota English Language Program
- Shank, G. D. (2006). *Qualitative research: A personal skills approach*. London, United Kingdom: Pearson.
- Smithee, M. B., Greenblatt, S. L., & Eland, E. (2004). *U.S. classroom culture*. Washington, DC: NAFSA. Retrieved from http://www.nafsa.org/Resource_Library_Assets/Publications_Library/U_S_Culture_Series_U_S_Classroom_Culture/
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yu, X., Isensee, E., & Kappler, B. (2016). Using data wisely to improve international student satisfaction: Insights gained from International Student Barometer. In Bista, K., & Foster, C. (Eds.), *Exploring the social and academic experiences of international students in higher education institutions* (pp. 212-232). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

XI YU, PhD, is an Evaluation Specialist at the International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Her major research interests focus on international student engagement on U.S. campuses, campus climate for marginalized college students, and internationalization in higher education. Email: yuxxx637@umn.edu

BETHANY PETERS, PhD, is a Teaching Specialist in the Minnesota English Language Program, University of Minnesota. Her major research interests lie in the areas of intercultural communication, intercultural group work, and faculty development within higher education. Email: bethanyp@umn.edu

Manuscript submitted: February 14, 2019

Manuscript revised: March 23, 2019

Accepted for publication: April 15, 2019