

Chapter 68

Understanding Language Experiences of International ESL Students in U.S. Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The authors examine how international ESL (English as second language) students construct their experiences of learning and using English in the classrooms. Studying language experiences of international students is crucial to understanding the factors that may affect their academic performance and engagement in social activities in American universities. The focus group discussions revealed various issues and difficulties faced by international students. These challenges included comprehending and writing academic texts in subject areas, engaging in classroom discourse, and communicating with native speakers outside the classrooms. In addition, the focus group discussions revealed discrepancies between language criteria used in ESL and subject area courses. Findings indicate that the language development of international ESL students and their academic experiences are complex. This study calls for a comprehensive inquiry approach to offer more support and better services for international students' successful adaptation into American academic and social lives.

BACKGROUND

International students are becoming a visible and significant subset of the student body in most American colleges and universities (Rai, 2002). According to the 2014 Open Doors report published by the Institute of International Education, the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by eight percent to a record high of 886,052 students in the 2013–14 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2014). The rate of increase has been steady for the past few years, with the number possibly increasing in the future. International students come from all over the

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world and study in a number of different fields, from social sciences to agriculture. They not only bring a positive impact to the U.S. economy, but also “contribute to America’s scientific and technical research and bring international perspectives into U.S. classrooms, helping prepare American undergraduates for global careers, and often lead to longer-term business relationships and economic benefits” (Institute of International Education, 2013).

The economic and social values of international student enrollment in postsecondary educations are salient. However, more attention needs to be paid to the experiences and needs of international students in studying and adjusting into American education system, especially their language experiences and needs. The lack of knowledge and support of international students’ language needs may negatively affect their learning and living experiences, which may prevent them from active participation in academic and social activities that could contribute to important learning and personal development outcomes of the universities (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005).

Among the increasing number of international students, more and more students are English language learners who enter the United States with limited proficiency in English and gaps in their educational backgrounds (“Preparing Teachers,” n.d.). Language skills are essential due to their effect on the social and academic performance of a student (Chen, 1999; Zhai, 2002). Lack of language proficiency may bring difficulty in academic tasks, prevent social integration (Trice, 2004), and also cause stress to international students (Chen, 1999). Many students who come from a very different cultural and linguistic background may have to undergo “double socialization,” whereby students not only need to adjust into a new school environment, but also to a distinctive language and culture (Li, 2000). They experience the same stresses of academic and personal life as their American counterparts, but these stresses are compounded by “unfamiliar culture and limited comprehensibility of the English language” (Huntley, 1993, p.27), especially for the growing body of undergraduate ESL speakers who came to the U.S. at younger ages (Redden, 2014). These international students may feel helpless and anxious being away from their home countries, families, and familiar culture (Fan & Yue, 2009). Some students may feel marginalized due to “the shift from being members of the majority race to the minority race” (p.3). One of the most prevalent and significant barriers for most overseas students to successfully adapt into education system and cultures of host countries is language (Mori, 2000).

A response to the language needs of international students is the existence and development of English language programs in higher education. Non-English speaking international students are a more vulnerable population given the significant linguistic adjustment needed to become ready to tackle the hurdles of subject area classrooms. Oftentimes students will be placed or required to take additional ESL classes in addition to their subject area courses. English language programs have been developed as a “service activity” or “remedial exercise designed to fix-up students’ problems” (Hyland, 2002, p. 386). However, in attempts to fill gaps or needs that ESL students may have, often considerations of a students’ knowledge or background experience are ignored. Furthermore, most instructors across the curriculum have very little training or understanding of how to address the learning needs of ESL students, and often believe that ESL programs are enough to remedy the issues faced by international students in traditional mainstream classrooms. Therefore, this study will contribute to the literature on international student adjustment into American academic and social living by bringing the voices of international ESL students to the forefront. As a result, it will help improve our understanding of the factors that affect students’ adjustment and provide ideas for more inclusive curriculum changes.

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