

Chapter 49

Culture and Communication Online: The Inclusion of International and Non-Native Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the challenges and opportunities encountered by international and non-native language learners participating in distance education. With the growth of online learning and the internationalization of education, it is necessary to provide literature regarding best practices for educating a diverse student population. Culture and communication play a significant role in how students engage in their learning. This diversity is less evident in the online classroom resulting in potential misinterpretations rather than the valuing of distinctive cultures, experiences, and uniqueness of every individual learner. An exploration of diversity, identity, community, engagement, and linguistics are discussed in relation to international and non-native language speaking online learners.

INTRODUCTION

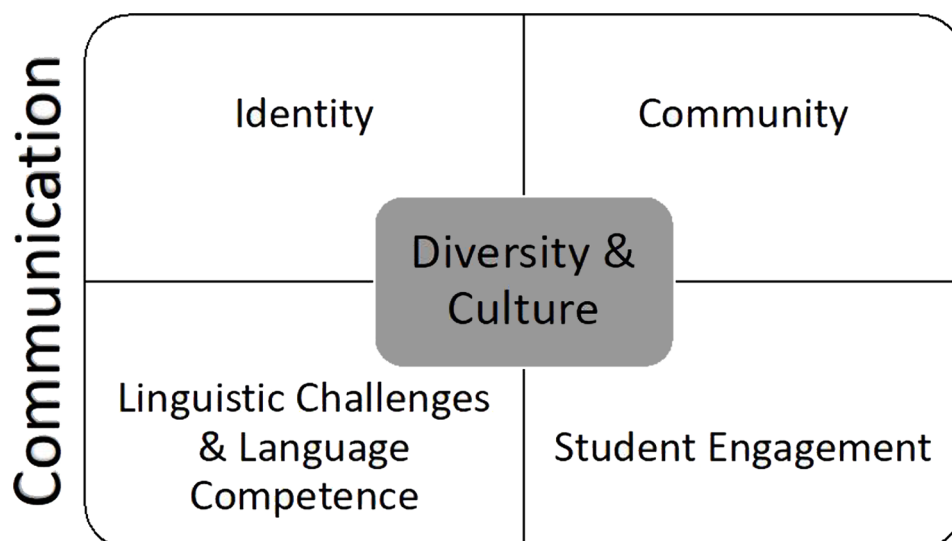
Participation in distance education is growing, and with it comes questions regarding its quality, who participates in distance education, and how best to teach and design instruction for these students. Like any classroom, online classes are comprised of diverse student populations with diverse needs that need to be met to cultivate cultural responsiveness and create a positive learning environment. Online and

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face-to-face instruction are vastly different but intricately connected entities; how do we adapt to various formats while ensuring success for all learners?

Additionally, there are increasing numbers of international and non-native language speakers in on-line courses; participating in an online course requires different language and communication skills than does a face-to-face course. So much of communication is based on body language, facial expression, and tone of voice. For international students and non-native language speaking students participating online, much of this communication is not available; they must adapt to gauge tone and intent in other ways, a challenge even for those who have language mastery in this environment. On the other hand, the increased flexibility with respect to generating responses and practicing written language are advantages. With increased awareness of the online learning space, educators can better understand how to create online classrooms that are most beneficial to online learners with varying language skills and cultural competencies and advance the distance experience for a culturally diverse student population. The purpose of this chapter is to present an exploration of the challenges and opportunities international and non-native language speakers, and therefore also their instructors, encounter in the distance environment due to diverse communication and cultural backgrounds. As presented in Figure 1, recognition of how diversity and culture in conjunction with learners: identity, community, engagement, and linguistic challenges and language competencies influence their online participation can improve learning and create a more positive experience for all. In the figure, the big picture of communication is represented by the large rectangle while diversity and culture occupies the center, as the core influence around which all the other components, identity, community, student engagement, and linguistic challenges and language competence, interact. Each of these components will be discussed in the following sections.

Figure 1. Interaction of Communication and Culture Online



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