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Challenges Facing Asian International Graduate Students in the US: Pedagogical Considerations in Higher Education

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Abstract

Non-Native English Speaking (NNES) international students attending colleges and universities in the United States often encounter difficulties in adjusting to their new cultural environment. In addition, they often struggle with academic language while learning the content and conceptual structures of various graduate level disciplines. This phenomenological study identified cultural and linguistic challenges experienced by NNES Asian international graduate students at a medium-sized rural university in the northwestern United States. A pedagogical framework and recommendations for professional practice address the linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of this particular student population in higher education.

Keywords: cultural challenges, cultural responsiveness, international students, learner-centered approach, linguistic challenges, scaffolding

The number of international students in the United States in 2008-2009 reached an all-time high of 671,616, reflecting an eight percent increase in student enrollment (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2009). In particular, Asian students represented 62% of the international student population (Kim, 2012). These numbers reflect an unprecedented and significant trend of mobility and migration, as well as an increase in cultural and linguistic diversity within higher education (Altbach, 2004; Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Kim, 2012). According to Al-Sharideh and Goe (1989), international students in the United States often encounter difficulties in adjusting to their new cultural environment. They come to the classroom with different worldviews, different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and varying strategies for learning. In addition, they vary widely in academic ability, motivation, prior educational experience, and English language proficiency (Arkoudis, 2006; Kim, 2012).

Many international students experience cultural and linguistic challenges different from those of domestic students (Arkoudis, 2006). They often struggle with academic language in

English while also learning the content and conceptual structures of various graduate level disciplines (Beaven, Calderisi, & Tantral, 1998; Lin & Yi, 1997). Differences in writing styles, linguistically and culturally driven logical thinking, and appropriately formulating thought into writing structures may vary widely and play a significant role in students' academic and interpersonal experiences (Levi, 1991; Zhu & Flaitz, 2005). Furthermore, to interact socially with American peers, instructors, and community members, international graduate students have to personally adjust to American culture and learning expectations. As an example, in some Asian cultures instructors have absolute authority and are not to be challenged by students (Ariza, 2010), which is very different from higher education in the United States. Although students often employ strategies for overcoming cultural and linguistic challenges, these culturally influenced strategies are not always understood nor valued by instructors and student peers (Arkoudis, 2006; Beaven et al., 1998; Millar, 2009). Western university instructors often categorize Asian students as either the brainy Asian or the rote learner (Marton, Watkins, & Tang, 1997). Researchers, however, have found that the learning patterns of Asian students reflect the type of curriculum and assessments encouraged by schools in their home countries (Barron 2002; Li & Kaye, 1998). In addition, Asian students tend to adopt spontaneous collaborative approaches in researching and writing assignments. Studies suggest that the employment of this type of group learning is highly influenced by the Confucian cultural values that focus on group work (Gatfield & Gatfield, 1994; Ramburuth & McCormic, 2001; Tang, 1996).

Given the increasing global diversity in student demographics in higher education, it becomes critical for instructors to understand NNES international graduate students' cultural and linguistic challenges in order to facilitate effective teaching and learning for all students. To create positive learning environments that prepare all students to interact and engage with others different from themselves, instructors must address cross-cultural and linguistic dimensions within the student population (Altbach, 2004; Wong, 2006). Considerations include the following: How do instructors understand and address cultural and linguistic challenges within the classroom? How do instructors create a sense of community within their diversely populated classrooms? How do instructors provide and create culturally and linguistically inclusive teaching and learning environments that are relevant and stimulating to NNES international graduate students as well as to other student populations?

Theoretical Framework

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Cultural responsiveness reflects the awareness of an individual to variances within cognition, behavior, language, and education among individuals who have differing racial, ethnic, social, gender, linguistic, religious, political, or other backgrounds and experiences. Characteristics of culturally responsive teaching include: assessing and using cultural knowledge and background of students, valuing and respecting diversity, managing the dynamics of differences, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge to facilitate student learning (Ariza, 2010; Banks et al., 2005; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). Culture changes (consisting of four key components: cognitive development, behavior, language, and education) were based on the influences and interactions of both internal and external circumstances (Collier, 2011). Culture shapes the way individual students think; the way they interact; the way they communicate, and the way they transmit knowledge to the next generation. To be culturally responsive, instructors must be knowledgeable of the cultural characteristics of their students and understand how culture affects learning and teaching (Gay, 2000; Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006).

Instructors' self-knowledge, knowledge of their local community, and knowledge of their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds are essential foundations for culturally responsive teaching. Instructors "who 'think pedagogically' about diversity are able to build a practice that is

both academically challenging and [culturally] responsive to students” (Banks et al., 2005, p. 245). Culturally responsive instructors are empowered to integrate students’ learning styles, learning expectations, and academic strengths into an inclusive learning environment for all students (Millar, 2009; Smith, 2009). Culturally responsive teaching impacts the development of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessments that are responsive to all students. By determining to what extent the native languages and cultures of international students represent a bridge or a barrier to learning, instructors may then adjust curriculum, course design, teaching methods, and assessments accordingly (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Culturally relevant knowledge empowers instructors to internationalize their teaching and work more effectively with diverse international students (Arkoudis, 2006). At the same time, domestic students also benefit.

Learner-Centered Instruction

Students who are exposed to and engaged in varying experiences and interactions are more likely to develop different and deeper types of competence, including cultural, linguistic, and academic. By using a learner-centered approach designed to promote and facilitate deep understanding, instructors create an inclusive context while facilitating processes, resources, and content. Students, on the other hand, are encouraged to articulate their own goals for learning and are actively engaged in the learning process. They construct knowledge, synthesize information, develop essential questions, and work collaboratively with others. In doing so, “learners make sense of course material and develop a deeper understanding than they would if they passively listened to a lecture” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 36). Additionally, instructors and students, as co-managers of learning, share the joint responsibility of generating learning opportunities in class. Learner-centered approaches become particularly powerful for NNES international graduate students seeking academic rigor and the opportunity to influence or co-manage meaningful learning contexts for themselves while also deepening their academic and social language skills in English (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). By centering the learners in the learning process, international students as well as domestic students are empowered to bring their own unique experiences as members of the larger global community and thus are engaged, thereby enhancing learning through the social, cultural, and linguistic dynamics and experiences shared among all students. As an outcome, learner-centered teaching becomes a tool for creating a culturally and linguistically inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students (Arkoudis, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2008).

Scaffolding

Vygotsky (1978) and other researchers (Ohta, 2000; Pérez, 2004) define scaffolding as a collaborative process that promotes cognitive development through sociocultural interactions. Learning opportunities that engage all graduate students in sociocultural interactions set the stage to deepen or enhance their cognitive growth while improving their academic English (Krashen, 2003; Pérez, 2004). “Social processes allow the language to become a cognitive tool for the individual” (Ohta, 2000, p. 54). The use of scaffolding by the instructor not only supports student understanding of content (comprehensible input), it also further develops students’ proficiency in academic English. All students gain in this process as language proficiency and content knowledge develop through interactions with peers and instructors. Scaffolding techniques include, but are not limited to, small group interactions, visual support, hands-on activities, clear directions, explicit explanations about tasks and assignments, and rubrics used as assessment tools that provide constructive, guided feedback to students (Davis & Miyake, 2004; Huba & Freed, 2000; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The use of scaffolding provides assistance or support via techniques or tools to help international students transition to a new cultural and linguistic environment while also attaining the targeted goal(s) for learning.

Insights from the Literature

Insights from the literature indicate the following issues that also impact the cultural and linguistic challenges experienced by NNES international graduate students. With the best of intentions, instructors often take a deficit view of the academic skills and differences of NNES international students. According to Carroll and Ryan (2005), instructors may see NNES international graduate students “as lacking in independent, critical thinking skills; as plagiarizers or rote learners, speaking broken English and having awkward ways of participating in class” (p. 6). Instructors may subconsciously accept the deficit view without realizing the impact of second language acquisition and cultural influences on learning and thinking. In spite of so-called deficits, international and other linguistically and culturally diverse graduate students bring additional academic skills, cultural knowledge, and worldviews that become value-added features for instructors to consider and incorporate when planning and delivering curriculum.

Despite the tendency in the United States to view Asians as a homogeneous community, Asian communities reflect great diversity in terms of political, social, economic, cultural, linguistic and educational features (Um, 1999). These differences have the potential to bring richness to the graduate classroom but challenge students and instructors alike as all struggle to find common ground for meaningful instruction, assessment, and worldviews (Gladding, 2009). Overzat (2011) indicated that one of the difficulties facing college instructors or counselors is the rich diversity among Asian international students. For example, in China alone, there are 56 native Chinese ethnicities; each has its own history and belief system. Yet, some Asian international students may come from a homogeneous society and may not have developed a distinct racial identity (Yang, Maddux, & Smaby, 2006). Even though Chinese international students from particular geographic regions might be quite similar, not all Chinese international students will share exactly the same worldview, nor should all Asian international students be expected to have the same views (Gladding, 2009).

For Asian international students, “learning and living in a different culture; learning in a foreign university context; learning while developing English language proficiency; and learning the academic disciplinary discourse” (Arkoudis, 2006, p. 5) offers a variety of challenges. Although all Asian international students do not share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they do share the common experience of facing linguistic and cultural challenges while studying in the United States. This phenomenon offers instructors a unique avenue for examining cultural and linguistic challenges experienced by NNES international graduate students participating in higher educational settings.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was (a) to identify the cultural and linguistic challenges experienced by NNES Asian international graduate students at a medium-sized rural university in the northwestern United States, and (b) to develop a learner-centered, culturally-responsive, scaffolded pedagogical framework to address these challenges in an increasingly diverse higher education environment. The research questions addressed through this study were:

1. What cultural and linguistic challenges were experienced by participants in relation to their graduate studies through university programs?
2. What strategies were used by participants in dealing with cultural and linguistic challenges experienced through their university programs?
3. What recommendations would these participants make to the university or specific programs that would help all international graduate students?

Method

This qualitative phenomenological study identified cultural and linguistic challenges experienced by a group of NNES international graduate students. Creswell (2007) states that phenomenological research focuses on “describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 58) and allows researchers to integrate “their own experiences and the context and situations that have influenced their experiences” (p. 58). Since globalization is increasingly important, the phenomenological qualitative analysis about “what” and “how” NNES international graduate students experience in American higher education learning environments will be instrumental for future curriculum design and research. In Creswell’s words (2007), “it is important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices” (p. 60).

The phenomenological approach allows a small group of participants’ voices to be heard while providing researchers in-depth understanding of the experiences shared by these students. This qualitative approach is supported by Lester (1999) who clarifies that by limiting participants to a smaller number, more in-depth reflection is encouraged by the participants and deeper insights gained by the investigators. Additionally, an interpretative phenomenological study, as described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, 2010), allows an emerging framework to develop through the analysis of the participants’ responses.

The following assumptions provided a foundation for this study: international students encounter cultural and linguistic challenges in contexts that are different from their native countries; international students may not have developed effective strategies for dealing with cultural and linguistic challenges in contexts that are different from their native countries; and many instructors are not pedagogically prepared to support culturally and linguistically diverse NNES international graduate students.

Participants and Contexts

This study was initiated at a medium-sized university of 15,000 students in a rural town in the Northwest. There were 139 enrolled international graduate students, accounting for about seven percent of the graduate student population. Five NNES Asian international graduate students, four male and one female, from three different countries voluntarily participated as a convenience sample in the videotaped focus group interview. Three were doctoral students and two were in Masters programs. All five participants had been in their programs for at least one year when they participated in this research study.

Procedure

The procedures of this study involved the following components: development of an interview protocol using the Focused Conversation Method (Institute of Cultural Affairs, 1994); human subjects approval; implementation of a focus group interview; and data analysis methods using charting, coding, and theme analysis.

Development of interview protocol. The interview protocol was designed using the Objective, Reflective, Interpretative, and Decisional (ORID) methodology, developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (1994). The ORID method began with a series of objective questions that functioned as a warm-up activity in which students provided relevant background knowledge information: home languages, majors, and educational experiences in the U.S. higher education classrooms. At the reflective level, questions brought forth personal and often emotional reactions

to the topic of discussion. At the interpretative level, meaning, values, and significance of the topic were revealed. Finally, at the decisional level, questions brought the conversation to a close, allowing respondents to draw conclusions about the topic of their discussion (Stanfield, 1997). The process allowed active participation in a spontaneous and free-flowing conversation (Barcillano, 2003).

Focus group interview. The focus group interview obtains contextual data from a group of individuals who share commonalities (Frey & Fontana, 1993). Krueger and Casey (2009) indicated that small focus groups, with four to six participants, are more comfortable and less threatening. In-depth insights can be accomplished with small focus groups because participants have more opportunities to express and share their experiences related to the topic studied.

The interview for this study was conducted in English and lasted approximately two hours. Participants' responses were voluntary. They were not required to answer questions unless comfortable doing so. The interview was also videotaped with audio, which allowed both visual review of physical responses (e.g., meaningful body language) and aural review of discussions.

Analysis and interpretation of data. The process of analyzing responses consisted of identifying "significant statements," sentences, or quotes that conveyed participants' experiences from the interview. The significant statements, sentences, or quotes were then categorized under key cultural and linguistic themes, coded, and charted for analysis (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Conclusions were then drawn based on: 1) the individual and collective responses of the participants relevant to the identified cultural and linguistic themes, 2) the relationship of student responses to the themes formulated through the literature review for this study, and 3) the identification of additional themes that emerged through the discussion with participants. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities; however, references to their native countries or native languages were included in the coding charts and written documentation of the study.

Roles and Perspectives of the Researchers

At the time of this study, we taught in the College of Education at the same university. Both of us have graduate training in and teaching experience with Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). One researcher has engaged in graduate coursework as an NNES Asian international graduate student in the United States with prior experience teaching English as a foreign language. She currently teaches graduate and undergraduate courses for teacher preparation programs. The other researcher is a native English speaker, who has worked with culturally diverse communities as a school district administrator. She has also taught graduate courses in educational leadership for prospective principals and superintendents.

Before starting this study, we had opportunities to interact with international students at the university where we taught. They openly shared their learning experiences, positive and negative, with us. We had also witnessed the perceptions among some instructors struggling to work effectively with international students in their classes. In many cases, the instructors did not appear to be culturally aware and/or did not have an understanding of the processes and time involved in second language acquisition and acculturation. The interactions we had with students and instructors led us to want to "explore" challenges international students face in the U.S. higher education context with hope that we could provide "insights" for instructors who work with them.

Findings

Most of the participating NNES Asian international graduate students indicated positive experiences at the university while also acknowledging various challenges. Initially, we focused on

giving voice to NNES international graduate students experiencing cultural and linguistic challenges. In the process of analyzing participants' responses, we discovered that their voices not only informed the purpose of the study and questions to be addressed, but also contained intersecting and complimentary insights and experiences, thus strengthening the overarching themes. As a result, in addition to linguistic and cultural themes, a third theme, instructional and academic challenges, emerged from student responses.

Linguistic Challenges

Participants' home language, prior knowledge of the English language, and proficiency levels of social and academic language have an influential impact on their learning, thinking, and performance in the U.S. higher education context. Understanding these linguistic challenges provides both students and instructors with insights that can be used to develop strategies for overcoming difficulties.

Understanding lectures. Linguistic differences between home languages and the English language may place a heavy burden on students to understand lectures, especially when professors speak fast or use slang or idioms with which the students are not familiar. George indicated, "People speak fast. Usually some professors do not think about this. They [professors] speak some slang, which [NNES] students do not understand." John shared,

I have hard time understanding lectures. Before I can do my writing, I have to understand what my professors say. I use a recorder to tape lectures and listen to the recorded lectures over and over (usually five or more times) until I fully understand the lectures.

Participating in classroom discussion. Study participants often found it difficult to participate in classroom discussions for a variety of reasons. They had to be able to follow the conversation contextually and with understanding, while also attempting to contribute orally to the discussion. At times, they felt inadequate expressing themselves to the point of feeling "stupid." Bruce shared his frustration, "English was the challenge. I sometime feel uncomfortable in the class, but if we can speak [our home languages], we don't feel so stupid." John added, "Listening and speaking skills in English are difficult [for me to participate]." Lisa said, "I feel anxious when speaking English in front of other students. I have difficulty participating [in] class discussions with classmates." Lisa also reflected that prior to participating in an English preparation program on campus, she had never actually spoken English although she had studied it before.

Developing language skills in social-academic contexts. Study participants expressed frustration with blended social and academic conversations. Tom shared,

We had study groups with American classmates. I realized sometimes that we are talking about a topic. Because in our Asian way, we solve the problem, just vote. But in our group, Americans they try to talk about everything related, not related. What is the point? They just keep talking clichés. It seems like we have a lot of discussion, but no, you just didn't catch the point . . . American students are not precise on . . . topics of conversations.

Because of the participants' expectations for academic focus in this scenario, they did not maximize the opportunity for social, linguistic interactions with native English speakers regardless of whether they were on task or not. Logistically, international students could have used the group meetings to practice their language skills, but due to their "Asian way, we solve the problem, just vote," they missed an opportunity to expand their linguistic skills in a blended social and academic context.

With a tone of frustration, George concluded by saying, “The more I learn English, the more difficult I think English is to learn.” This student’s response reflects the challenge of developing language proficiency for academic success.

Time for reading and writing. Participants in this study indicated the tendency to read academic texts slowly in order to better understand content. They needed more time for reading and writing. John shared, “International students spend a lot of time reading.” Tom also indicated that “reading in English is challenging” for him.

Cultural Challenges

Social relationships. The prevailing social relationships international students faced in higher education included those with instructors and staff, native English-speaking peers, and community members. According to George, “Culture [in the United States] is really different from what I experienced in my country. Here people do more things individually.” This statement points out the cultural differences he was experiencing. Since NNES Asian international graduate students based their expectations for social relationships on their home cultures, they were not always comfortable with developing social relationships on campus or in the classroom. Lisa indicated that the relationship between students and instructors in her native country was somewhat distant, formal, and serious. Consequently, it was difficult for her to approach instructors for help: socially, linguistically, and academically. Fortunately for Lisa, once she asked her instructors for assistance, she found them easy to approach.

Most participants indicated limited opportunities to interact socially with domestic students, in the classroom and outside the classroom. A linguistic disadvantage manifests from the students’ perceptions about limited opportunities to practice social language skills with native English speaking (NES) students. George commented, “I feel left out in summer because there are not many native speakers on campus.” Bruce shared,

On campus, just a few of the American students will talk with you, accept you. It is a limited conversation. Americans always like to talk about the sports games. We have no kind of American football in my country. We do not have the knowledge to talk with them.

Through the above examples, students shared their actual experiences with social interactions, reflecting cultural differences from what they knew previously about their native cultures, had anticipated for their present environment, or wanted to experience.

Expectations for time. Perceptions of time vary across cultures. As indicated by Hall’s cultural iceberg model (1976), the concept of time reflects cultural values that are invisible or implicit to people from different cultural backgrounds. How international graduate students prioritize and use their time may be different from American students. For example, Tom indicated, “American students are not precise on time . . . This is scientific time and everything is fast. I don’t have American time.” Tom also expressed,

American friends are always late. I am always waiting for them. I thought Americans talked what they thought. Every time they would say okay, 3:00 p.m. Then, they would call and say, ‘Oh, I’m sorry. I have to run an errand.’ Here everything is slow.

In addition, Bruce shared his perception of scheduling individual appointments with instructors who were not available at the scheduled time or during office hours. From the student’s description, it is not clear whether the instructor did not keep posted office hours or lost track of a scheduled

appointment. Either way, the scenario lends itself to a cultural and/or communication mishap, which becomes confusing and frustrating for the student and which can be perceived as a barrier to success.

Instructional and Academic Challenges

Cultural and linguistic awareness by instructors equips them to effectively reach out and engage NNES international students in rigorous, meaningful, culturally responsive and inclusive instruction.

Instructional delivery. Course structure and the delivery of content reflected another blend of cultural and linguistic challenges for study participants. Lisa indicated,

The course syllabus is a good introduction for international students. We prefer . . . specific information and guidelines for assignments. If the syllabus is not clear, it is difficult to know what to do, how assignments should look, and so on.

Tom shared that he is a well-organized person. “I want to know ahead of time what is going to happen.” Course delivery becomes ineffective and non-inclusive when instructors use culturally embedded explanations or examples, speak too fast, or use unfamiliar slang. In these situations, instructors themselves pose a potential learning barrier for culturally and linguistically diverse students. According to George,

People do not always speak in a structured way that helps people understand. Usually some professors do not think about this. In order to explain something, they often use examples that are U.S.-based. International students still have no clue.

Unmet academic expectations. Participating students indicated they were looking for a rigorous and intellectually challenging academic environment. Instead, they felt some courses were not challenging and, at the same time, not aligned with assessments given within the course or program of study. Tom discussed his perception of the program’s comprehensive exam.

A comprehensive exam is a total conclusion of all the work. Here, there are two exams. The first level is multiple choice, which to me seems like a drill. The essay for the second comprehensive exam overlaps [with the multiple choice] . . . It is kind of like torture to me.

When expressing this concern to the instructor, Tom was told, “It [timed writing] is a good opportunity to train students to work under a high pressure situation.” For this student, overlapping content and practice while working under pressure did not represent academic rigor nor did it represent curricular alignment for a *comprehensive* assessment. Bruce shared that some “courses are too easy to pass, but we get nothing . . . [yet we are not provided] enough experience in English and enough resources to do the comprehensive exam.”

In some cases, participants’ expectations for academics were not met. Most expressed interest in research, more practical field experiences, and internships. From Tom’s perspective,

More internships and working experiences for graduate students would be helpful. They cannot just learn the knowledge from textbooks. They [professors] should force students to go out and do community experience to get the experience. Studying in the classroom is not enough.

Bruce shared, “International students are interested in doing research . . . during their studies.” Students participating in this study were looking for academic rigor, opportunities for research, and collaborative involvement in a larger community as part of their academic career and to expand their linguistic and cultural competence.

Student Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Linguistic strategies. Participants in this focus group were aware of their linguistic strengths and weaknesses. They engaged in an on-going effort to improve their language skills. John shared, “I audio-taped lectures and would listen to them up to five times to make sure I had captured all the content.” Other students shared efforts to visit churches in order to practice language skills. Bruce said, “I go to different churches to make friends and practice my English.” Others spent extra time reading. Additional strategies to overcome linguistic barriers included watching TV, self-talk in English, and spending time in the cafeteria talking with native speakers. George shared his strategies, “I practice my English by paying attention to how people say things in the supermarket, in the classroom. . . . Sometimes, I talk to myself in English when I walk.” All these examples reflected a commitment to learning.

Cultural strategies. Participants expressed interest in learning about American sports in order to engage in social conversations with native speakers. Some students found the community to be open for conversation. George said, “I learned how to play basketball and watch football.” This was his strategy for bridging a cultural gap. Bruce indicated “hanging out at the campus gym” as his strategy for meeting and engaging in conversations with native speakers. John said, “I spend time in [the] cafeteria talking with students. I like to live on campus, so I can talk with American students.” Lisa practiced English by talking with and exchanging food with neighbors, while Tom explained that he enjoyed making friends. His strategies included traveling and visiting churches.

I travelled visiting San Francisco, Disneyland, Las Vegas and other places. I take pictures and keep a photo/picture diary. I go to different churches to make friends. In church, Americans will talk to you . . . I want to experience life in the U.S. I was burned out in my country, working 14 hours a day, seven days a week.

Instructional and academic strategies. In order to meet their instructional and academic expectations and goals, students have to integrate linguistic and cultural strategies within their courses. In the United States, asking instructors for assistance is a common strategy for coping with academic challenges. That approach may require a blend of linguistic and cross-cultural adjustments for international students, who may have a difficult time asking for assistance from their instructors. As study participants worked through these challenges, they found instructors to be approachable. George said,

When I first came into a classroom, I was really nervous. The instructor of the class shook hands with me. ‘You are fine. If you have questions, come to me.’ It really took the pressure away from me . . . Professors [are] more knowledgeable . . . I feel I am becoming a better thinker.

Lisa shared her experience, “Sometimes [I] have to ask for assistance from professors and have found professors here very nice and willing to help.” These strategies reflected participants’ commitment and creativity to overcome cultural challenges and build social-cultural relationships to support their academic success.

Recommendations: A Pedagogical Perspective

The pedagogical recommendations that follow address issues shared by study participants and reflected in the conceptual framework regarding cultural and linguistic needs of international students. For many instructors and graduate students, the use of this conceptual framework with its accompanying pedagogical recommendations represents a significant departure from expected and commonly-used instructional strategies.

Linguistic Strategies

Language is one of the barriers that international students identified in this study. Instructors who understand and instructionally address the varying levels of students' language proficiency are better prepared to provide equitable access to instruction for NNES international graduate students. The following strategies can assist instructors in thinking about course design and delivery of instruction.

Scaffold student learning. NNES international graduate students bring different levels of English language proficiency to the university classrooms. Some students converse well but do not have the same academic language proficiency as native speakers to fully participate in all aspects of instruction: reading content materials, academic writing, research projects, and interactive activities either in class or online. Others may have academic language proficiency in reading and writing but do not yet have the capacity to fully understand spoken language. International students' English proficiency affects how fast and how well they read and write. They learn better when learning is scaffolded. George suggested, "when dealing with IS [international students], they [instructors] need to think we are different. English is one of our barriers. [Instructors should] try to be more . . . helpful. We need extra help."

Instructional strategies that scaffold student learning include: organizing class activities and facilitating academic interactions among students and themselves in a way that enhances and clarifies linguistic and cultural contexts for all students. Instructors should carefully select reading materials, design appropriate course assignments and assessments, and use a variety of resources (e.g., visuals, texts, audios, videos) to support student learning in the classroom. Realizing that NNES international students, and possibly other students, need more time to process information, instructor expectations for timed reading and writing assignments may need to be adjusted. Instructors who intentionally employ scaffolding strategies are able to facilitate and further develop all students' academic English relevant to the content area.

Increase linguistic awareness within the classroom environment. Because language plays an important role in teaching and learning, instructors should be aware of varying linguistic patterns among NNES international graduate students. Instructors should avoid culturally embedded terms and examples as well as slang, when explaining vocabulary and concepts in class. If used, these expressions should be introduced to the entire class to assure a common understanding by all students, including the international students. When delivering instruction in class, instructors should keep the following in mind with relation to their language: (a) simplify complex language; (b) keep it relevant to the content; (c) explicitly define culturally-embedded terms and expressions; and, (d) maintain a good rate of speech, paced so as to be comprehensible. In addition, key concepts may need to be reviewed or repeated to ensure students' understanding.

Cultural Strategies

International students come to the classroom with different prior knowledge, experiences, and backgrounds, which affect how they learn and think in the classroom. Consequently, instructors should use a variety of instructional strategies to address different learning styles and preferences that ensure student success.

Internationalize teaching and learning: View culture as an instructional asset. Instructors need to be aware of students' different prior experiences and incorporate them in their plans for teaching and learning (Arkoudis, 2006). The following strategies can be used to accomplish these goals: cooperative learning in which students work together interdependently in small collaborative groups designed to accomplish a particular task or learning activity; reciprocal learning in which students take turns being the teacher and explain their learning and understanding to each other; small group discussions; and, comparisons of differing perspectives. Additionally, these strategies allow students to express their viewpoints while exploring commonalities, differences, and applications to course content. Instructional activities such as bringing in guest speakers with international or other cultural experience, fostering discussions that explore differing perspectives, and encouraging students to explore the curriculum from an international perspective, use cultures as assets in the learning process and help prepare all students for participation in a global society.

Understand students' cultural backgrounds and expectations. Tom suggested, "If you want more students to come . . . , you should be more international." Instructors should attempt to bridge cultural differences that may unintentionally hinder NNES international students' learning in American higher education. These differences include but are not limited to students' cultural expectations in relation to time, space, and social interactions as well as their expectations for knowing, teaching, and learning. Instructors should specifically and clearly communicate their expectations involving office hours, making appointments, grading procedures, asking for help with assignments and clarifications, class content, and test preparation strategies. By taking the time to be clear and explicit with expectations, instructors can address feelings of uncertainty in students and additionally build community and trust. Instructors and staff should be friendly and open when talking with all students in settings outside of the classroom: the gym, the library, before and after class, and other non-classroom locations when they encounter the students. Instructors should make sure that classroom activities include social interactions among students. Cooperative or reciprocal learning strategies and other types of group work facilitate the development of social relationships among students. In addition, students should be encouraged to take advantage of resources available on campus, as these opportunities expand their circle of social relationships, whether they are seeking assistance from the library or a tutoring center, working out at the gym, or attending a social event on campus.

Academic Strategies

The effectiveness of a lesson lies with instructional delivery in terms of student engagement, interaction with the content, student understanding of the content, and student performance. With the various linguistic and cultural backgrounds of NNES international students, instructors should be culturally responsive to students and focus on "teaching academic content in and through English" (Millar, 2009, p. 1) to ensure learning is meaningful to all.

Provide clear directions and course expectations. Because of varied prior schooling and linguistic backgrounds, NNES Asian international graduate students need clear and detailed directions in order to successfully engage with various academic tasks and procedures. For example, the syllabus should be very specific with detailed information about the design of the

course, textbooks, specific timelines, expectations as to how and where to submit assignments, and expected outcomes for students participating in the course. In addition, class activities and assignments should be clearly designed with detailed instructions. As Lisa said,

The syllabus is a good introduction to international students. [I] prefer professors to give specific syllabus and to give guidelines for assignments. If they are not clear, it is difficult to know what to do, how assignments should look, and so on. . . . I hope advisors can give international students more information about their schedules, internships.

Scaffold course rigor through pedagogical methods and strategies. To maintain rigorous course content and high standards instructors should use pedagogical strategies that engage all students. For NNES international students, cooperative learning is particularly effective and essential as it engages students in intellectually and culturally inclusive learning experiences, while expanding their language and social skills. Bruce's recommendation for "one-one discussion/mentor between native speaker[s] and international student[s]" is one strategy for instructors to use that "gives more connection with school practices." Cooperative learning groupings should reflect differences in students' learning abilities as well as their ethnic and linguistic diversity. Guided reciprocal peer questioning, think-pair-share, cooperative debates, send-a-problem, graphic organizers with jigsaw, and talking chips are examples of cooperative learning activities to use in a scaffolded learning environment (Millis, 2010). These strategies create and provide a context for international and native English-speaking students to share and discuss content from their various perspectives.

Provide relevant research and field experiences. International Asian students participating in this study indicated an eagerness to gain knowledge and skills useful for their career when they return to their native countries. Bruce stated that "[international] students are interested in doing research during their studies . . . develop some type of research together." Tom shared, "More internships and working experiences for graduate students would be helpful. [Instructors] should force the students to go out and do community experience to get the experience. Studying in the classrooms is not enough." Whenever possible, instructors should provide, support, or encourage opportunities for them to engage in research, internships, and field experiences related to academic studies. NNES international graduate students expect and want to have opportunities to engage in real-life scenarios that provide them with practical experiences, to expand their knowledge, as well as to practice their language skills and cultural understandings in real-life contexts.

A Paradigm Shift for Professional Practice

Research has found that academia is aware of the learning needs of international graduate students (Beaven et al., 1998; Carroll & Ryan 2005; Lin & Yi, 1997; Millar, 2009). It has been our experience that many instructors who work with NNES international graduate students: (1) are not always aware of cultural and linguistic differences; (2) do not always scaffold their pedagogy and expectations in ways that promote success for all students; and consequently, (3) often miss opportunities to build a sense of community among a diverse student population within their courses. Instructors who know or value students' cultures will be more likely to fully access, facilitate, and assess what their students know and can do (Ariza, 2010; Gay, 2000). How to best address these issues, however, is still not clear due to the widely diverse backgrounds of international graduate students (Ryan, 2005). All students, regardless of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, should be supported to succeed academically, culturally, emotionally, intellectually, physically, and socially in a rigorous academic environment. Unfortunately, the academic culture

within higher education does not always foster learner-centered approaches to teaching, scaffolding to support differentiated learning and the development of social relationships as part of the support for academic learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). The following considerations may be used by instructors as they begin, continue, or deepen their paradigm shift.

Employ Learner-Centered Instruction

Learning is a social activity involving interactive, dynamic, collaborative processes and social interactions between instructors and students as well as among students. A learner-centered approach offers a structure within which instructors adapt instruction, assessment, and interaction among students. It represents a significant cultural shift within higher education. In using this approach, academic rigor is not only expected, it is supported. The instructor facilitates learning processes and creates equitable access to resources and content. At the same time, all students have the opportunity to further develop their academic skills in thinking, writing, speaking, and problem-solving, while deepening their content knowledge. Within this context, NNES international students are encouraged and guided to construct knowledge, synthesize information, develop essential questions, work collaboratively with others, and actively engage in the learning process.

Mere input or exposure to learning contexts is not enough to support international students' academic success. By facilitating student engagement among peers, native-speakers of English and NNES international graduate students, instructors set the stage for deeper levels of learning and increased academic competencies for all students. The employment of learner-centered scaffolding by the instructor not only ensures student understanding of content, it also supports and develops students' proficiency in academic English.

Incorporate Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Pedagogies

Learning, language, and culture are inextricably linked. Culturally responsive instructors assess students' cultural knowledge, value and respect diversity, manage the dynamics of differences, and incorporate cultural knowledge in professional practice. By developing their own awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity, instructors recognize that the native language and culture of each individual student provide an additional set of tools or resources for learning and teaching (Genesee, Geva, Dressler, & Kamil, 2008; Pérez & Nordlander, 2004). Instructors should develop a rigorous academic foundation that continues to grow and change through the influence of their ever-changing student population as well as through new dimensions within their content area(s). Doing so provides a value-added dimension for the course, the program, and the institution while providing opportunities for students and instructors to expand their thinking to a broader global environment. Linguistic and cultural differences experienced by NNES international graduate students should be regarded as cultural assets, as opposed to academic deficits, and integrated into the learning process. In this way, instructors are able to build a practice that is both academically challenging and culturally responsive to all students.

Expand Curricular Applications to Include Global Perspectives

What is our curriculum in higher education? Is it focused on a local view, a regional view, a national view, or a global view? Are we able to define the similarities and differences for our students? Local students need to see a broader global context in order to better understand local applications in relationship to global ones. NNES international students may already bring with them the broader global context, but may not be proficient in sorting out local dimensions based on cultural and linguistic contexts. Learning processes should be supported by the histories, experiences and diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of all students participating in higher education settings. These cultural and linguistic adaptations prepare NNES international graduate

students as well as domestic graduate students to be more productive within international and/or global contexts.

Discussion

The challenges and differences impacting NNES international graduate students and the instructors who serve them have the potential to positively or negatively impact academic achievement for all students. These linguistic and cultural challenges also represent opportunities to change pedagogical practices, design high quality instruction, enhance student learning, and promote higher levels of academic rigor for all students.

After 3 years in the U.S, I have learned a lot these couple of years and [I am] eager to learn more because I think I will lead a better life. [I am] a better thinker, a better writer, and student. [I] feel good about myself. People think differently about me. (George)

As instructors become more familiar and comfortable using a scaffolded, learner-centered, pedagogical framework that is culturally and linguistically responsive, all students will be more likely to achieve higher levels of success in an academically rigorous and meaningful graduate program of study. The students themselves provide an important resource. By listening to all students' voices and understanding their perspectives, instructors develop the capacity to gain a deeper understanding of student needs. Instructors can use students' cultural and linguistic strengths to adapt course design, enhance their own professional practices, and engage students across differences. These instructional practices support diversity awareness on and off college campuses, promote inter-group understanding and relations, and improve the capacity of all learners to engage in deeper levels of academic understanding while broadening students' capacity to explore multiple perspectives.

The pedagogical framework highlighted through the findings from this study provides insights to instructors interested in working more effectively with Asian (and other) NNES international graduate students. It may represent a paradigm shift from traditional approaches to instruction in higher education, but there is strong evidence supporting learner-centered, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogical practices. These approaches require instructors to actively engage with learners in co-construction of knowledge, demonstrate cultural responsiveness, and develop linguistic awareness. In addition, these pedagogical changes may require intentional efforts and critical reflection by the higher education community when addressing the common phenomena: cultural, linguistic, and academic challenges experienced by NNES international graduate students.

In order to create culturally and linguistically inclusive teaching and learning environments, instructors may need additional support and training. Supporting instructors as they develop or refine pedagogical practices within this framework will benefit the entire higher education learning community. Instructors' implementation of the recommended framework will not only broaden the scope of domestic students to include a global perspective, it will also help international students better understand the differences and similarities between their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and those of other students and instructors with whom they interact. In general, the suggested framework promotes learning for all and enhances the experience for everyone involved.

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