Successful Adjustment of International Students in English-Medium Universities: A Model of Academic and Communicative Competence

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Abstract

• This research looks at the experiences of international students studying in five English-speaking countries. All together, these countries attract more than one million international students each year.

• This presentation will
  – Examine specific issues international students face in adjusting to study abroad.
  – Propose a model academic and communicative competencies which contribute to the successful adjustment of these students to their host university.
A Fast-Growing Population…

Students from non-English speaking countries are studying abroad in record numbers, with particular gains in students from China, India, and South Korea.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source markets where the source market is in the top five list of a destination country</th>
<th>Australia 2006</th>
<th>USA 2005–06</th>
<th>UK 2005–06</th>
<th>Canada 2004–05</th>
<th>New Zealand 2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>46,075</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>62,582</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>51,080</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>25,431</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>76,503</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>19,250</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>14,932</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>5,515</td>
<td>-10%</td>
<td>11,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>9,948</td>
<td>-7%</td>
<td>7,849</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9,575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>8,772</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>7,575</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>1,160</td>
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<tr>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
<td>5,590</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>59,022</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>3,413</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>38,712</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>6,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2,879</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28,202</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5,235</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<td>-1%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>21,490</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
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<td>31%</td>
<td>6,192</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>9,615</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>849</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6,640</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All countries</td>
<td>172,297</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>564,766</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>234,350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top five source market colour key:

- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd
- 4th
- 5th

n/a: UK numbers only available for top 35 non-EU source markets
4 Keys to Successful Adjustment:

• Developing English-language skills
• Adopting new learning & teaching styles
• Finding appropriate university-level support
• Negotiating relationships
Developing English Language Skills

• Demands on oral/aural abilities from being immersed in the host university
  — NNES students report considerable difficulty in understanding and speaking with their peers and instructors. Students in one study “estimated that their first year at university they had understood between 20 and 30 percent of lecture content” (Johnson, 2008, p.235)

• Adjusting to new writing conventions
  — Writing assignments are often difficult because students lack knowledge of academic conventions (Campbell & Li, 2008).

• English as stand-alone courses vs. embedded in content areas
  — Study skills and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) topics are best internalized and applied by students when they are “embedded in course content” (Peelo and Luxton, 2007, p.75).
  — Students value a discipline-specific approach focused on language in their content area, rather than on general English skills (Baik & Greig, 2009)
Adapting to New Learning & Teaching Styles

• Independent (student-directed) vs. Instructor-directed

  — Some students cited as one of their biggest achievements the development of “independent learning skills that transformed their learning experiences,” while some were uncomfortable with the expectation that they should take ownership of their own learning (Campbell & Li, 2008, p. 380).

• Independent (student working solo) vs. Collaborative

  — Many students saw value in having group discussion and saw participating in group work as beneficial towards engaging with the content area, practicing English, and getting to know native students (McClure, 2007; Campbell & Li, 2008; Arkoudis & Tran, 2007).

  — Group-work causes concerns around grade assignment for both international & domestic students (Ramsey & Mason, 2007).

  — International students in mixed classes were often reluctant to engage in class discussions or in group work (Chapman and Pyvis, 2006).
Finding University-Level Support

• **Type of University Support**
  
  — **Academic Concerns vs. Personal Life**

  • Common support programs: ESL classes, tutoring, writing center/lab, English conversation groups, writing and conversation workshops, planned social activities for international students

  • Difficulties cited include finding a place to live, learning new transportation systems, making friends, & dealing with medical and health issues (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2006).

• **Accessibility of University Support**

  — **Communication from University**

  • Dissatisfaction among international students regarding level and quality of communication from their host university (Campbell & Li, 2008).

  • International students do not always know about or take advantage of available university support services (Grayson, 2008).

  — Language/writing support (e.g., writing workshops) an additional burden on students who are already busy/overwhelmed
Negotiating Relationships

• Student-Instructor
  – Cultural values and classroom norms are a challenge to identifying appropriate roles in class participation, student-faculty interactions, and peer-to-peer interactions (Campbell & Li, 2008).
  – Students coming from cultures where uncertainty avoidance, or low tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, is a strong cultural tendency find it more difficult to express themselves in class (Brown, 2008).
  – Instructors are not always able or willing to help individual students adjust to course expectations, especially when such assistance might be seen as unfairly advantaging foreign students (Ramsey, 2007).
  – Instructors are not culturally neutral actors; the “cultural conventions, norms, and canons” of the classroom transmit and reinforce cultural values (Campbell & Li, 2008, p. 381).

• Peer-Peer
  – Difficult to adjust to a less explicitly competitive and more collaborative working environment between students (Campbell & Li, 2008).
  – As “the degree of social interactions with hosts decreases, the degree of culture shock increases” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 180).
Model of International Student Adjustment

DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC COMPETENCE
- Developing English language skills
- Adapting to new learning & teaching
- Negotiating the student-instructor relationship
- Finding appropriate university-level support

SELF-MOTIVATION
- Know & apply self-help strategies
- Take responsibility for own learning

DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

STUDENT BACKGROUND
- Resilience
- Family & financial support
- Language skills
- Similarity of home & host cultures

FACULTY SUPPORT
- Understand & accept alternate modes of expression
- Modify instructional styles

UNIVERSITY SUPPORT
- Social programs for international students
- Support programs for language & study skills
Implications & Lessons Learned (1)

Instructors should...

• Appropriately support student adjustment & language development (e.g., by encouraging independent autonomous work, developing supportive relationships with their students).

• Think of English as a content area as well as a medium through which content is accessed.

• Provide NNES students with more explicit feedback, and model correct or appropriate structures and formats for assignments.

• Help students to feel at ease in a more participatory classroom by encouraging them to engage in learning community activities.

• Balance fair expectations of course performance for domestic and international students while taking into account the cultural differences between students in the class.
Implications & Lessons Learned (2)

Institutions should...

• Provide support for ELLs that is systematic, on-going, and which does not overly burden the students.

• Address expectations for academic performance prior to the students’ arrival at the host university.

• Create opportunities for social interaction not only with other international students but also with native students.

• Continually advertise support programs to students.
Implications & Lessons Learned (3)

Students should...

• Take advantage of available university support services such as ESL classes, tutoring, conversation groups, the writing center, and/or the ESL support center.
Conclusions

• English-medium universities have enormous potential to welcome international students.

• Must do so in ways that are collaborative, respectful, and productive for all students.

• Main factors which impact the overall successful adjustment of the student to the host university through their academic success, development of English language skills, and interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and the larger community.

• Model aims to organize and link together the many issues which contribute to the successful adjustment of international students to their host university.
Selected Bibliography


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