
Learning in a Foreign Land: Adjustment of International Graduate Students to the United States

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the results of a survey of international students from a department at a large Midwestern university. The survey attempts to understand why international students are reluctant to interact in class. The survey also looks at the adjustment of international students in general. The paper presents some possible ideas being considered to address some of these issues.

Keywords

International students, education, interaction, culture shock, graduate students

ACM Classification Keywords

K.3.1 Computer Uses in Education, K.3.2 Computer and Information Science Education

Introduction

Each year students from all over the world come to the United States seeking an education at American universities. These international students are an important part of the education system for a variety of reasons. These students contribute to a better understanding of the world by sharing their culture with

those who interact with them. They help diversify the research and teaching that goes on at American universities by bringing in their unique experiences from around the world.

Unfortunately some international students are not comfortable with sharing their thoughts and ideas with Americans. International students may not interact in class, feel awkward in groups and sometimes not feel accepted by others.

The goal of this research is to understand the reasons that graduate international students feel this way and to hopefully come up with some possible ways to lessen these feelings.

Target group

International students at the graduate level have some overlap in concerns and problems as those at the undergraduate level. Undergraduate and graduate international students deal with similar issues but undergraduates also experience adjustment to a different level of learning, more responsibility for their own academic and life course which adds to the stress of learning in a foreign land. The primary difference in these students lies in their maturity as a college student.

Church and Pruitt found that younger students and undergraduates have an easier time adjusting to a host culture. Graduate students on the other hand report more academic and personal satisfaction with their time abroad. [1,4]

Graduate students have already learned to function in a higher education system so they have some idea of

what to expect. Graduate students can also be expected to understand how to manage their academics and life outside of school. Because of these factors the graduate student's reaction can be perceived as more to the United States and the university than to a different learning style and increased freedom.

Literature Review

The body of literature regarding international students is diverse. Many papers have been written about international students and their unique issues. In the literature review I encountered a variety of surveys from many different fields.

Schram and Lauver indicate that "academic success may be hindered by inadequate or slow adjustment to the university setting." They cite a painful period of adjustment that includes vulnerability, loneliness, loss of identity, helplessness, desire for dependence, fear, bewilderment, hostility and alienation. [8] A majority of the papers included in this review listed similar symptoms of cultural adjustment.

All International students are required to learn English and pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language, TOEFL, prior to studying in the United States. Even with this test students still feel unprepared or lacking in their English skills when studying in the U.S. Much of this is due to the difference between formal English which these students learned and conversational English which is used by many Americans. "Most International students do not expect the considerable discrepancy between interpersonal and academic English until they arrive in and English-speaking country." [2]

"Sometimes I don't understand the phrases of informal conversational English which they use. I am okay with formal conversations." – Male, 22-25, India

"I think my English is poor so I do not want to waste other people's time. They need to spend more time in understanding me. I know it is wrong because most of them are very nice and probably would not think like that. But I still have to convince myself to interact with them more often." Female, 22-25, Taiwan

"Sometimes I cannot find the word for something, so I shy away a bit." – Male, 30-34, Costa Rica

"I can express my overall opinions and ideas in a simple level. But sometimes I feel very uncomfortable if I cannot deliver my ideas in very details as I did in my country. Also, I feel more uncomfortable in understanding them rather than expressing myself." Female, 26-29, South Korea

Students on why they don't interact in class.

International students can become overwhelmed with the number of new words and phrases they need to learn to be able to communicate with Americans. This may cause them to seek the friendship of people from their own country whom they are more comfortable conversing with. [2]

Relationships with American students have been repeatedly noted to be very beneficial to international students. [8] In a study by Westwood and Barker international students who were involved in an 8-month program where they were paired with host national students had higher grades and higher retention rates than those who were not involved in the program. [9] Unfortunately many of these relationships often don't go beyond superficial contacts. This can cause international students to give up on forming close bonds with American students. [3]

American students for the most part have very little knowledge about the countries their classmates are from. They may be genuinely interested in learning more about their new classmate's country but will ask questions such as "Do you have running water?" or "Do you have cars over there?". These questions can indicate to the international student that Americans believe the students are from "uncivilized" or "primitive" societies. This can make the international student feel the American student sees them inferior and not as intelligent this can hinder communications both in and outside of the classroom. [2]

Much of what I found in the readings can be summed up in a portion of the Li paper written by Fox, one of the co-authors. Fox writes "what resides at the root of so many problems with international students is fear –

fear of staying or writing the wrong thing, fear of not appearing responsive or sufficiently smart or knowledgeable, fear of embarrassment, fear of being different, fear of not fitting in. In short fear of being foreign." [2]

International Student Survey

Based on the literature review a survey was constructed to understand if the issues found in the literature review were also present in the international student population at a large Midwestern university. A number of the questions for the survey were inspired by a surveys conducted by Rajapaksa and Surdam. [6,7]

The survey was conducted online to preserve the anonymity of the students. This allowed them to speak freely about their feelings without the fear of being identified. I focused the first round of surveys within the department I am part of since I have been given the opportunity to suggest changes based on this research. Students were recruited through the graduate student listserve for the department.

I received 32 responses to the survey 11 females and 21 males. The majority of the respondents were from originally from India and were master's students.

The importance of interaction and friendships with American students on the adjustment of international students and the student's level of classroom interaction are the key pieces of data discussed here.

American friendships

Surdam indicated previous experience living abroad could help speed up the adjustment of the student to

"I need time to think and organize the way of saying, but when I think about it, teacher still is talking. I don't want to miss any part of that. So most of time, I choose to keep silence." – Male, 26-29, China

"Since I am worried if they would understand my question or not. Also, I am worried if I could understand their answers correctly or not. (it is more comfortable to find written information afterwards by myself or to ask close friends in person.)" Female, 26-29, South Korea

"Some things which are important to me are at times not important or too obvious to native Americans." Male, 22-25, India

"I feel a little nervous when I need to speak English. I might be a little bit unconfident about whether I can explain my opinion right in English. But I will always try to speak up when necessary regardless of how nervous I am." – Male, 22-25, China

Students on why they sometimes don't ask questions in class.

the United States. The three students who had spent time in English speaking countries seem to uphold this hypothesis. These students indicated a great deal of comfort interacting with Americans and in classroom interactions. In the area of American friendships only one of the seven said they did not have any close American friends. For the most part this group indicated that they spent time with American students..

As a whole the international students sampled felt that a few Americans have tried to get to know them. The small group who felt many Americans have tried to get to know them listed English as their primary language. Students who listed their primary spoken language as their native language had a much lower occurrence of American friends.

Half of the respondents indicated they don't spend time with Americans. Of that group one person indicated they spend time with only other international students, three indicated people from own country and internationals and people from their own country only. Only two students from this group indicated they were not comfortable with Americans

The other half of the group respondents indicated they spent time with only Americans, two indicated Americans and other internationals, four indicated Americans and people from own country. Seven people from this group spend time with Americans other internationals and people from own country.

Classroom interactions

A majority of the students in the survey indicated they always or almost always interact with students and the professor in class. Overlapping the question of whether

the students ask questions in class on top of these results found three students who indicated that they don't ask questions in class.

Most of the students in the survey felt comfortable asking questions in class whenever they wanted to. In this case also the minority felt uncomfortable asking questions or getting clarification on a topic. Even though this group is the minority the answers they gave as to why they were uncomfortable were what I focused on. The primary reason seemed to be a lack of confidence in their English skills.

A majority of the group didn't have problems understanding the professor. An interesting correlation here is the overlap of asking questions in class and understanding the professor. Most of the students who said they didn't ask questions in class indicated that they typically didn't have difficulty understanding the professor. Most of the cases the students wrote about not being able to understand were cultural references and strange accents which could be difficult for an American student to understand. This suggests that the problem is not in the students understanding it is in the fear of making a mistake or saying the wrong thing that keeps them from sharing their thoughts.

Initial Ideas

Many of the issues faced by international students are centered on fear. Fear is a difficult problem to tackle and getting rid of fear completely is not something that can be addressed by this research alone. The ideas I propose address areas where fear is a hindrance and hope to lessen the fear.

"When professors talk about something which I am not familiar with, I would be lost. For example, American politicians, history. Or when they using some words or phrases I don't know."
Female, 22-25, Taiwan

"It was hard when I first came here 1 year ago. But it's getting better and better now. I also think the accent of the professor really matters." Male, 22-25, China

"If professors use examples/ anecdotes etc. from American culture." Male, 22-25, India

"I don't know who are Steve Colbert until recently I saw the announcement in White House 2006. Sometimes professor discuss and argue about the phenomena or event, but I don't really know what that is." – Male, 26-29, China

Students on why they sometimes don't understand the professor.

Textual questions

One of the primary issues of many students is a lack of confidence in their mastery of the English language. Many students in the survey indicated that this lack of confidence kept them from speaking up in class. Many of them feel more confident in their written English skills since they can think about what they want to say and have an opportunity to edit their thoughts.

Because many students feel more confident in their written skills than their spoken skills a possible idea to get more students to participate in class would be to allow them to ask questions via an instant message or text messaging system. This would allow the students to ask whatever questions they wanted with anonymity.

One Chinese student indicated that he didn't understand cultural references to Stephen Colbert in class. If a system like this was in place he could have sent a message to the professor indicating that he didn't understand who this person was. The professor could then have the option of taking a few minutes to explain this further.

This would also allow for students who might be embarrassed by their pronunciation of English words the ability to ask questions and participate without the fear of embarrassing themselves in front of other students.

In most classes just about every student has a laptop and the room in which classes are conducted has a computer. A system like this could probably be set up without a great deal of cost.

Peer mentoring

The literature review has indicated that when International students spend time with American students they are generally better adjusted and more confident in their English skills. Many of the papers I have read suggest some sort of peer mentoring system to help adjustment. I feel this is a good idea also but will only go into brief detail on it since others have spent much more time documenting a system like this. [3,9]

Some of the students in the survey indicated a lack of comfort around American students. Having an American mentor would give them the opportunity to have one American student they know they can go to.

Education of incoming students

Survey results and the literature review indicate that international students sometimes feel that Americans don't understand the countries they are from. This can lead to unintentional misunderstandings about the culture of the student that may lead to discomfort on the part of the international student.

The last concept I present to help ease the transition of international students is an e-learning system that will teach incoming students more about the countries that their peers are from. This system would be used for all students not just Americans since other international students may not understand countries that their peers are from.

The content for the system would be created by students currently in the United States who are from the same countries as incoming students. This will allow the students to talk more about what they have

encountered as misunderstandings and less about the typical fact sheet of a country. Another part of this system would teach the other students a few words in the language of that country. This would help in creating some common words that are not English.

Limitations of this study

Since the user group was so small and concentrated on only one department the statistical significance for this information is difficult to find. A larger sample is planned to find significance for this data.

The group that was studied is also very social across cultural lines so this may have impacted the reactions of the survey participants. The validity of this idea will also be tested in a campus wide survey.

Future Work

I am working with the Office of International Services to distribute the survey to all International students on the campus. From here I will analyze the data for trends that span across departments and countries of origin.

I am planning a modified case study of a few students. Li's paper is based off of his case study and provides a number of interesting insights not found in other papers. [2]

From this information a list of recommendations will be compiled and presented to the department. Hopefully some of the final ideas will be able to be incorporated into the department.

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