Exploring International Students’ Experiences: Sociolinguistic Factors and Engagement with American Students

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Introduction
Like many American colleges, Penn State Abington has seen marked growth in its international student enrollment. Over the past 10 years the number of international students has increased from 6 (Fall 2006) to 156 (Spring 2016). Studies show that these students find their sojourn in the U.S. to be life changing endeavor that provides many benefits and challenges as they adapt to a new social and academic culture. Most studies were done at large, residential research universities. The purpose of this study is to explore experiences of international students at Penn State Abington, a commuter campus. Specifically, it examines sociolinguistic factors and challenges international students may experience when interacting and engaging with American peers both in- and out-of-class contexts.

Literature Review
Researchers have identified a number of common problems encountered by international students during their study in the U.S. These problems are generally categorized as academic, social and personal (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The major academic problems include difficulties in understanding lectures, class participation, academic integrity, and preparing oral and written reports. The personal problems include housing, homesickness, lack of financial resources, and food. Social problems include American values and customs, making friends, and acceptance by social groups. Many studies examine the social interaction patterns and nature of interaction between international and American students (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Klomegah, 2006; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Williams & Johnson, 2011). These studies report that students from non-European countries are more likely to experience greater constraints in their social and academic adaptation and limited interaction with American students.

Methodology
An online survey (Qualtrics) was administered to all (N=156; Spring 2016) international students holding F-1 visa status. There were 38 usable responses (return rate of 24%). Survey items were generated based on review of existing literature. The instrument consisted of three parts: demographic and background questions, scale questions on linguistic and cultural aspects of interaction, and overall adaptation items.

Findings
Demographics
The gender composition of survey respondents was 55% females and 45% males. Sixty-eight percent (N=26) of students came from China and 32% represented the following countries: Bangladesh (1), Brazil (1), Canada (1), India (1), Indonesia (1), Malaysia (1), South Korea (5), and Sri Lanka (1). Half of the respondents (50%) completed high school in their home countries and the rest in the United States, with the exception of one student who studied abroad in high school. Slightly more than a half (55%) of the respondents had lived in the U.S. for 2 or fewer years, 24% had been for 3-4 years, and 21% had been for 5 or more years.

Language Use

Friendship
- 68% have American friends
- 87% have friends from home country
- 90% have friends who are international students from other countries

Linguistic Confidence
Respondents’ perceived level of confidence in English skills is generally higher when they interact with other international students and listen to class lectures. Potential problem areas are the following:
- Speaking with American peers outside of class (19% (N=7) lack confidence)
- Speaking English in class (16% (N=6) lack confidence)
- Participating in small group discussions (21% (N=8) lack confidence)
- Understanding American peers in class (21% (N=8) lack confidence)

Sociolinguistic Factors and Interaction

Interaction

Overall Adjustment

Overall Acceptance

“Because of culture differences and different lifestyles, there are not many common topics to talk about beside study [sic].” (A survey participant’s response)

Conclusion
The results help understand experiences of international students at Penn State Abington, specifically issues relevant to their sociolinguistic adjustment in college and interaction with American peers.
- International students are generally satisfied with their adaptation to college.
- Language and sociocultural differences present some of the major challenges to effective interaction and engagement with American students.
There are certainly considerable opportunities to foster and facilitate greater interaction and engagement of international and domestic students to contribute to international students’ social and cultural adjustment in college.

References

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