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# Why are you giggling? An exploratory investigation of communication educators' interactions with international students

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## Abstract

*International students represent a significant proportion of the student population on the campuses of colleges and universities in the United States of America. They are perceived to be different from domestic American students, and expected to face many difficulties in the processes of language learning and culture adaptation. This study investigated how educators interact with international students. Journalism and Mass Communication was selected as the focus area due to its high demand for language proficiency. Nine Journalism and Mass Communication educators were interviewed in depth, and they commented on their interaction experiences with international students. The interview data, when analysed for recurring themes, showed that international students were considered to be highly motivated and hard-working. However, they were perceived to be relatively slow and inefficient in communication with their educators. The two major challenges for educators were language difference and culture difference. To help international students overcome their difficulties, mutual understanding and trust-building were very important for educators. This article summarises the key findings from the interview data and produces some recommendations that may be useful to other communication academics teaching international students.*

## Introduction

International students are an important constituency for colleges and universities. They add vital cultural richness to the academy (Tan, 1994), and represent a significant proportion of the student population on campuses worldwide. On the

campuses of U.S. colleges and universities, they are a significant presence. Statistics show that international students earn 30 percent of the doctoral degrees awarded in the United States, and 20 percent of newly hired educators in science and engineering are foreign-born (Levin, 2006). Accordingly, U.S. colleges and universities have developed support services (e.g., Office of International Affairs) to assist international students with a variety of needs, ranging from adjusting to the academic requirements to dealing with cultural factors of being submerged in social settings (Heggins & Jackson, 2003).

International students, like other sojourners, usually experience difficulties as they find themselves in an unfamiliar environment after entering an academic programme at U.S. colleges and universities. They try to adjust themselves to the culture of the institutions they attend. However, they encounter many challenges in this adaptation process. Some factors (e.g., international students' lack of confidence in speaking) may create unfortunate situations (e.g., misunderstanding between educators and international students) (Collingridge, 1999). How to make international students' adaptation proceed more smoothly becomes an important pedagogical issue. For example, how can educators help international students overcome some of their adaptation difficulties? Are there any pitfalls that educators need to be cautious about when they communicate with their international students? This study is an exploratory investigation in this research direction, attempting to shed some light on the above questions from educators' perspectives. In this study, I focus on the area of Journalism and Mass Communication due to its high demand for language proficiency, which is usually more

challenging for international students. By conducting in-depth interviews with nine Journalism and Mass Communication educators, I hope to provide some valuable insights into educators' interactions with international students.

### **Literature review**

Several previous studies have attempted to identify problems experienced by international students. For example, Crano and Crano (1993) developed an inventory of student adjustment strain, in which respondents were required to identify the sources of their strain. The findings suggested that the problems associated with culture shock and language barriers explained significantly more strains than other factors.

I will explicate these two major difficulties faced by international students (culture shock and language barriers) in the following sections. To simplify the issue of language barriers, international students are conceptualised here as non-native English speaking students who study at U.S. colleges and universities. The exclusion of students studying in the U.S. who have come from English-speaking countries such as New Zealand and Australia in this conceptualisation does not mean those students are not 'international students'. It suggests only that those students have less language difficulty compared with other international students.

### ***Culture shock***

International students usually experience an array of difficulties in their sojourn (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). The typical term describing their feelings of disorientation and helplessness while adapting to a different environment is 'culture shock'. Culture shock can be conceptualised as people's emotional and physiological reaction to a sudden immersion in a new and different culture (Barna, 1976). I am using culture shock in a broad sense here to encompass not only the instantaneous alarm that might occur in the first days or weeks of cultural transition, but also the longer adaptation that constitutes international

students' unfamiliarity with the academic conventions of the American classroom culture, such as patterns of teacher-students' interactions, grading systems, classroom behaviour and networking.

Culture is "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9). When international students leave their home countries and come to the United States, they are facing an entirely different culture, in which the language, norms, laws, and people might all be very different from those in their homelands. This change quite often contributes to international students feeling uncomfortable and to some degree feeling marginalised within the academy (Heggins & Jackson, 2003). It is this strange new sense of feeling not-at-home, which can engender ongoing anxiety and uncertainty, which I am referring to under the broad terminology of 'culture shock'.

The reduced ability to interact within the social and communication structure of a different society causes most of the phenomena of culture shock (Barna, 1976). When an individual enters into a different culture, all or most of the familiar social cues are removed or jeopardised. He or she is like a 'fish out of water', which is very likely to elicit feelings of frustration and anxiety (Kanaiaupuni, 1980). According to Furnham and Bochner's (1982) social skills and culture learning model, international students experience culture shock because they are unaware of the implicit social rules that regulate interactions in the host country. Being unaware of these social rules, international students may lack specific social skills that are necessary for effective communication.

Barna (1976) suggested that culture shock is a state of disease. It has many effects, different degrees of severity, and different time spans for different people. Common symptoms of culture shock include a rejection of the new environment by withdrawal or a hostile and aggressive attitude, a longing for home, abnormal concern over minor issues, and others. Winkelman (1994) argued that culture shock is a multifaceted experience. Most sojourners will go through four phases: the

honeymoon or tourist phase; the crisis or culture shock phase; the adjustment, reorientation, and gradual recovery phase; and the adaptation, resolution, or acculturation phase.

Instead of “culture shock,” some researchers also use the term “cultural stress” to describe the cultural difficulties of sojourners (e.g., Kim, 1988), referring to tension and uneasiness with a new environmental culture. Westwood and Barker (1990) illustrated that it is very possible for international students to experience stress or become depressed.

The notion of cultural stress encountered by international students has been supported by many studies (e.g., Berry, 1985; Church, 1982; Klineberg & Hull, 1979). The factors that lead to cultural stress include: information overload and a lack of familiarity with the educational system; wrong decision-making that results in course re-takings; and negative evaluations of international students by the host society during the early period of their stay.

Communication skills and adaptation are essential in alleviating cultural stress. International students need to learn and acquire new communication patterns that are acceptable in the host society. Both close communication interactions and casual acquaintanceship interactions with host nationals help significantly with reduction of culture stress (Olaniran, 1993).

### *Language barriers*

Besides culture shock (or cultural stress), international students encounter another major problem: language barriers. Language is the most clearly recognisable part of culture (Hofstede, 2001). It plays an important role in getting over culture shock. However, learning a new language is difficult, particularly for adults. This learning task alone is quite enough to cause frustration and anxiety, no matter how skillful the language teachers are (Kanaiaupuni, 1980).

Language difference is considered as a major source of cultural stress. Knowledge of the host culture’s language is essential for all communication activities and successful

cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 1988). Consequently, lack of proficiency in English will intensify both academic and socio-cultural stress for international students in the United States (Olaniran, 1993).

Lack of proficiency in English has long been considered one of the greatest problems among international students (Solberg, Choi, Ritsma, & Jolly, 1994). Many studies have shown that international students perceive their limited English language ability as problematic (Holmes, 2005). Inadequate English and associated lack of confidence in self expression have multiple consequences. For instance, international students require more time than their classmates to accomplish learning tasks (Burns, 1991). They find it difficult to participate in class discussions (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones, & Callan, 1991; Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Samuelowicz, 1987). Due to the language barrier, international students sometimes have problems taking notes, answering questions, and writing assignments. Marginal competence in English can also affect their ability to concentrate in lectures (Heggins & Jackson, 2003).

Although international students are required to demonstrate minimum language proficiency by taking the “Test of English as a Foreign Language” (TOEFL) to attend U.S. colleges and universities, not all of them have adequate practical or conversational usage of English. For those students who have not mastered the necessary language skills prior to their entry into the United States, academic loads could be incredibly heavy. Previous studies have shown that language proficiency is highly correlated with international students’ academic performance (Stoynoff, 1997).

Lack of language proficiency could also cause severe problems in interpersonal communication such as communication apprehension (Jung & McCroskey, 2004). For example, international students are more likely to find themselves in situations where they feel threatened by a requirement to speak (Jung & McCroskey, 2004).

The original conceptualisation of communication apprehension was “a broadly based anxiety related to oral communication” (McCroskey, 1970, p. 269). It was later defined

as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Second-language situations could create and amplify communication apprehension. Moreover, the uncertainty of living in a different culture could also induce international students to have higher levels of communication apprehension (Jung & McCroskey, 2004).

### ***Research question***

This study set out to inquire generally as to what roles universities and educators can play in helping international students overcome the difficulties they encounter within educational institutions. Specifically, it asked what insights experienced educators can contribute, as the bulk of research to date has tended to focus on students’ needs with less attention paid to educators’ perspectives.

Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) suggested that for healthy social integration, international students need monocultural, bicultural and multicultural friendship networks. Universities can help international students by facilitating the formation of these networks. The authors suggested the universities promote interactions between international students and university staff, provide orientation programmes, and organise activities such as sightseeing excursions, cultural evenings and so on.

Collingridge (1999) argued that educators’ teaching strategies toward international students need to be carefully tailored. International students will benefit if their educators provide simpler terms or definitions in class when necessary. Moreover, some international students may need more assistance from their educators than their American counterparts.

According to Thompson and Thompson (1996), educators need to understand that an effective solution for American students may not be available or even appropriate for international students. The authors proposed several methods for helping international students, such as using small groups, and making changes in lecture style and class format. These strategies are expected to

improve international students’ academic performance and social integration in the classroom and, ultimately, to help them feel a stronger sense of involvement in the academic community.

Although several researchers (e.g., Collingridge, 1999; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Thompson & Thompson, 1996) have suggested ways to assist international students, empirical evidence in this research area is very limited. The objective of this study is to enrich the literature by providing an exploratory investigation of how educators interact with international students. A general research question is proposed as follows:

RQ: How do college and university educators interact with their international students?

This research question could be analysed from either educators’ perspectives or international students’ perspectives. I chose to address the question from educators’ perspectives, an approach that has rarely been applied in prior studies. Journalism and Mass Communication, an area which relies heavily on clear and effective oral and written communication, is the focus of this study. I assume that such an area is more challenging for international students in their language learning process, and potentially elicits more feelings of frustration and stress. Therefore, it is useful to examine the research question within this domain.

### **Method**

I applied a qualitative research method, in-depth interviews with a series of expert informants, in this study. Eleven educators in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication in a large research university in the United States were contacted via E-mail. The selection of these interviewees was based on their teaching experience. All of them have taught international students before and they are all experienced and senior teachers.

Nine educators responded to the E-mail and agreed to be interviewed. The average length of their teaching career is more than 21 years, meaning their collective experience totals almost 200 years of student interaction. Their teaching and research areas cover almost all aspects of journalism and mass communication.



Among the nine educators, five are male and four are female. Three are foreign-born (from China, India, and Mexico respectively).

The interviews were conducted in the educators' offices from April 21 to May 2, 2006. When arranging the interview time, the interview questions were forwarded to the educators via E-mail, giving them time to reflect on their thoughts. The interview questions were constructed to be open ended, so as not to restrict input from the interviewees. In the interviews, the educators were asked to recall prior teaching experience with international students and were encouraged to use examples. The educators were also asked to describe the teaching methods they had used with international students, such as how they graded international students' assignments. Further, they were required to comment on why they used such methods, and how those methods functioned. All the interviews were recorded. They ranged in length from 30 minutes to an hour.

## Results

All the interviews were transcribed carefully in preparation for a qualitative theme analysis. The corpus of interview data revealed five concurrent themes. I choose to call them: international students' unique features; international students' major difficulties; strategies of assignment and grading; different ways to provide assistance; and potential pitfalls to avoid. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

### *International students' unique features*

Did the educators observe any differences between international students and American students, either inside or outside class? Two educators pointed out that it was hard to make a universal conclusion. In their opinions, students from different geographic areas are apparently different, but students from the same region or even country could also behave differently from each other in some ways. Moreover, the total number of international students in Journalism and Mass Communication programmes at U.S. institutions is much smaller than that of

American students. The unbalanced student population size might potentially bring certain biases to the conclusions. However, despite these limitations, all the educators interviewed admitted that they had observed some general differences between international students and American students.

In the educators' eyes, the most prominent strong point of international students is that they are very committed, motivated, and hard-working. They are perceived to be strong students at an overall level, and the educators like to have them in the class.

One educator noticed that the majority of international students in his department are graduate students. In his opinion, strict self-selection procedures, in which international students take a series of tests (e.g., TOEFL and GRE) and meet high criteria prior to admission, means they treasure such an opportunity and appear to be more serious about their academic programme. They consider it a privilege to have a higher education abroad. They perceive that they may be at a disadvantage or have problems because of language, and hence they work harder to overcome it.

In spite of the strong points, international students are also perceived to have some shortcomings. In terms of two-way communication between educators and students, international students are perceived by educators to be relatively slow. In the educators' eyes, American students are more willing to come to educators sooner, to talk and ask for help, while many international students are hesitant to do so. One educator commented that:

They [international students] are not used to how approachable we are, and sometimes how informal we can be with our students...When I work with new international students, that is one of the first things I tell them. Just do not try to do these [assignments] on your own. You are learning a whole new culture, a whole new educational system. Probably you are going to have questions, and you need to be not afraid, not embarrassed to do this [asking for advice].

Another educator made a similar comment. He said:

The biggest problem is that we don't know what the problems are. In the first or second weeks, everything is wonderful, and then a few weeks later, they [international students] find reading takes longer, they don't understand what is going on, they are hesitant to ask for help. On the other side, educators don't know that international students are having problems. Even if you ask them, like "how is it going?" Most of them are reluctant to say that "Yes, I am having trouble."

Several educators attributed this phenomenon to cultural differences, and believed that the power distance between educators and students is greater in some cultures than it is in the United States. Therefore, students from those cultures might consider educators to be unapproachable. One educator observed that many international students were so respectful to authorities that they tended to use theories without questioning. Another educator said international students, especially those from Asian countries, often wanted to please their instructors and therefore did not complain when complaining was appropriate:

They [international students] may present themselves as more successful than they actually are. When they run into problems, they don't come to talk about what the problems are. They are just going to do it on their own, so they don't look like they are having any trouble. Maybe they are too slow to communicate with their educators, and too interested in looking like they are succeeding, and they don't seek help when they need to.

Cultural difference also prevents international students from submerging themselves into social settings. One educator observed that American students made friends with their educators and fellows very quickly. However, international students were less confident when they were interacting with their educators and their American counterparts:

Most of the international students tend not to socialise with American students as much as American students socialise with each other. That is one thing that I observed. In my view, students learn from each other as much as from their teachers. That is an important difference between international students and American students.

Another educator reached a similar point. She said that international students tended to communicate more often with other international students. When they encounter trouble, they also tend to seek help from educators who are from their home country or a close region.

### *International students' major difficulties*

All the educators interviewed agreed that international students would face several challenges when they tried to adapt into a new environment. Two major difficulties for them are language difference and culture difference.

The language obstacle for international students was widely observed by the educators. Both oral and written communication skills are believed to be crucial for international students to succeed in the area of Journalism and Mass Communication. Some students do not have very good English skills, which becomes a significant hurdle. In the news writing class for example, as one educator commented, writing a news story under a deadline pressure could be very stressful for international students.

English, I think, is a very difficult language... We have the same word that means different things, and we have different words that mean the same thing. For examples, usage of the article "the, a, an" is very confusing.

Another educator had a unique observation. According to her, many international students worried a lot about their writing abilities. Therefore, they tended to use quantitative research methods in which they could play with numbers instead of words.

Moreover, several educators felt that some international students had less trouble with writing, but were apparently under-prepared for speaking. As a result, many of them were

inactive in class participatory exercises. Sometimes when they spoke, they could not make their points clear. The language issue poses a challenge for both students and their educators. Educators needed to listen very carefully to fully understand what those international students mean.

Besides learning a new language, international students might also find it difficult to get used to a different cultural and educational system. In one educator's viewpoint, it is not very easy to get used to an environment with many new things such as food and religion. Another educator said that some social issues could potentially take a lot of energy and time from international students and later become very annoying. For international students, almost everything is going to take longer at the beginning. What a person can do in a five minute phone call in their office is probably going to take an international student half a day to figure out who to call and what to do:

Those [international] students are also worried about other things, such as setting up a telephone, a checking account...Some of them have never had a checking account before! At the very beginning, they are very excited, but later they get very homesick.

Another challenge for international students is that they need to understand the differences between the educational system in the United States and that in their home countries. One educator said that even though international students were given information to read, they might still understand it within the framework in their home countries. As a result, some of them failed to understand what proper conduct is within the American educational system, including what constitutes cheating, which may lead to severe consequences.

### ***Strategies for assignments and grading***

There was no consensus among the educators regarding assignments and grading. Some of them took the language issue into consideration, while others held the same standard for both international students and American students.

Some educators interviewed said they did not penalise international students for spelling and grammatical mistakes because they thought what they taught was not a language course per se. Those educators tended to look more at the underlying ideas in international students' work. If the content was good, even though the writing might not be very elegant, it would not be discredited. Interestingly, one educator said she was harsher to American students if they wrote in poor English, but she was more tolerant with her international students:

If international students have grammar mistakes in their papers, which is very typical, I will suggest them to go to the university writing centre. It is really very important for them to improve their writing, but I will not say it is a shame on you or something like this, but for an American student, I will say you turned in a nasty paper! You should not have made such mistakes.

In order to help students improve their work, the educators applied different teaching strategies. For example, one educator always asked his students to turn in their drafts first, which would not be graded. When the drafts were returned with some comments, students had an opportunity to see what mistakes they had made and then correct them. Although this strategy was applied to both American students and international students, the latter might take more advantage of it with grammar correction.

Another educator taught method-related courses for many years. In his opinion, language was not a big obstacle in such classes. However, he admitted that occasionally there were some students whose English was so problematic that he did not understand what they were writing about. In these cases, he undertook heavy editing on the first one or two pages of the students' work to show them how to improve. He said, "It is almost like teaching them how to fish, rather than giving them a few fish."

Instead of taking the language issue into consideration, other educators interviewed had different philosophies. They believe that students in the graduate school needed to do their work well and fulfil all the requirements even if they were not native English speakers.

International students need to know that the criterion is the same for everyone in the end. No educator will sign off on a thesis or a dissertation with poor quality just because it is written by an international student.

Again, taking the news writing class for example, one educator said the criteria were firm for everyone in that class. Five points were deducted for each spelling or grammar or punctuation error. She found that international students were very frustrated with this rule, and felt it unfair. Some international students failed in the class and retook it. However, the educator insisted that the rule was necessary although it was tough for some students:

I did not do anything different at all with my grading. But I spent more time with them [international students] outside class, teaching grammar, explaining rules, and going over their papers, and explaining why they got something wrong. When we train students with news writing, we assume that they will be working for an American company, and they need the skills. A news story in the *Washington Post* has to be written well, regardless where you are from.

### ***Different ways to provide assistance***

If international students are expected to encounter many difficulties, what can educators do to help them out? The interview data showed that mutual understanding and trust building were very important. A consensus among the educators interviewed was that they should be more understanding with international students' difficulties. They also had to be patient in their communication with the students and give much feedback. Moreover, educators might need to provide some emotional support when the student was running into a crisis. One educator stated that he could be most helpful only when mutual trust was established between him and his students:

When I gained mutual trust between me and the student, we became not only student and teacher, but close friends. We became very loyal to each

other. They trusted me, and they told me what they were afraid of. Then, I can help them. I knew what they were thinking and what their situations were...I advised them and helped them to interpret the situation and handled the situation. In many cases, the students resolved the crisis beautifully, but other times it was not so successful because I and the student lost trust.

Another educator said that when international students sought her advice on research topics, she usually helped them to identify what they wanted to do instead of what they thought they *should* do:

I listen to international students for what they are interested in and help them follow what they are interested in and give them permission to do that, so that they are not doing the thing they think they should be doing to get a job or to please their parents. Because when you are doing something you are passionate about, it is going to be better.

Beyond academic advice, the educators believed they could provide other suggestions. For example, one educator often suggested his international students get involved in social activities and learn more about local culture. He also encouraged international students to speak more in his class, and not be afraid of making mistakes. Another educator said that she tended to talk to her international students frequently, to find out if there was anything wrong. If she detected a problem, she took action immediately:

If some international students withdraw from the class, if they never talk, never volunteer, never answer a question, I can't wait for the international students to come to me and express that they are having some problems, I need to talk to them and establish some relationship...I need them to realise that it is okay to come in. I want them to know that I don't hold it against them.

### ***Potential pitfalls to avoid***

Most educators interviewed found it was pleasant working with international students.



However, a few also recalled some embarrassing encounters.

One educator commented that it is probably not a good idea to try to offer help without being asked because the assumption that other people need help might be offensive in some situations. In her viewpoint, she would keep watching a situation to see if any student was really falling behind and then talk to that person. She did not want to make pre-judgments on what international students could or could not do.

Another educator said that it was very important to understand international students' backgrounds and respect their religions and beliefs. She admitted that she needed to be more sensitive to her words in the class and not assume that what she thought was funny was also funny for other people:

I am very naïve and uneducated about other cultures. I did not realise that until I started to teach international students... I made one international student in my class very uncomfortable when joking about gender issues, which hindered his performance in the class because he did not feel comfortable talking to me.

Another educator also stated that it was quite important to understand different cultures. He described an interesting anecdote in the following way:

A Taiwanese student giggled pretty often when I was talking to her about her thesis. It struck me that it was strange because I thought we were in a serious conversation... Later I found out that giggling is a mask of not knowing what is going on or being embarrassed!

### Conclusion

In this exploratory study, nine senior Journalism and Mass Communication educators were interviewed and they commented in depth on their interaction experiences with international students. Apparently, in the educators' eyes,

international students are a special group on the campus. It is widely accepted that these students are somewhat different from American students. Many of them are confronted with difficulties in the process of learning English and adapting to the American educational system. An important pedagogical question then arises: How can educators help these students overcome their difficulties?

There are several implications of the interview data analysis in this study. First, many international students lack adequate language skills and proper understanding of the American culture. As argued by Furnham and Bochner (1982), understanding of the implicit social rules within a host culture is crucial for sojourners' effective communication. To help international students understand the difference between the American culture and their cultures, educators need to provide some suggestions. For example, in some Asian cultures, it is rude to interrupt an educator's lecture and pose some questions. However, such a two-way interaction is usually encouraged in American classrooms. Therefore, to get international students involved more in the class discussions, educators sometimes need to explicitly tell them what is "good" and what is "bad" in the American educational system (e.g., interrupting and asking questions is not "bad" but "good").

Second, international students may experience stress or become depressed (Westwood & Barker, 1990), both due to academic load and social distractions. Educators need to understand that international students are sometimes overloaded. To help them alleviate the stress, an orientation party or research roundtable could work. For example, when many students (of course not just international students) find the references in a media law article confusing, a roundtable talk will be very helpful in reducing academic stress.

Third, it seems that there is no global rule dealing with assignments and grading for international students. The language issue might need to be taken into consideration in some contexts, and not in others. A general suggestion here is that when the course is mostly theory or method-based, language should not be regarded as too crucial. That is to

say, educators can be more lenient with mere language mistakes. On the other hand, if the course itself requires a very high demand of language proficiency such as news writing and public relations writing, no differentiation should be made between international students and American students. Since international students choose to take these courses, they have to be confident with their written English and find a way to survive, such as discussing the grammar with their instructors outside class.

Finally, there are some pitfalls that educators should be cautious about when they communicate with international students. To avoid misunderstanding, trust building and two-way communication are important. International students need to learn more about their host culture. Educators also need to be equipped with some knowledge of international students' backgrounds and cultures.

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