

Strangers in Stranger Lands: Language, Learning, Culture

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Abstract

This study investigates international students' perceptions of the issues they face using English as a second language while attending American higher education institutions. In order to fully understand those challenges involved in learning English as a Second Language, it is necessary to know the extent to which international students have mastered the English language before they start their study in America. Most international students experience an overload of English language input upon arrival in the United States. Cultural differences influence international students' learning of English in other ways, including international students' isolation within their communities and America's lack of teaching listening skills to its own students. Other factors also affect international students' learning of English, such as the many forms of informal English spoken in the USA, as well as a variety of dialects. Moreover, since most international students have learned English in an environment that precluded much contact with spoken English, they often speak English with an accent that reveals their own language. This study offers informed insight into the complicated process of simultaneously learning the language and culture of another country.

Readers will find three main voices in addition to the international students who "speak" (in quotation marks) throughout this article. Hong Li, a Chinese doctoral student in English Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia, authored the "regular" text. Second, Roy F. Fox's voice appears in italics. Fox is Professor of English Education and Chair of the Department of Learning, Teaching, and Curriculum at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Third, Dario J. Almarza's voice appears in boldface. Almarza, a native of Venezuela, is an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at the same institution.

Key words: English Language; United States Culture; Language Learning; International students; English as a Second Language; Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills; Academic Language Proficiency

Many international students have reported that they have not felt welcomed and have been treated like uninvited guests in a strange land. (Tan, 1994)

Introduction

As an international student from China, I have studied and lived in America for almost one year. This was also a year to grapple with the English language that got me into hot water at any time. For instance, my limitations in speaking and listening created a great deal of stress for me. When conversing with native speakers, I often felt helpless because I could not speak freely what was exactly in my mind. I often became easily lost in conversations, just due to missing a word or a sentence. The worst situation occurred when I sometimes heard only the sound of peoples' voices in English but knew nothing of what they were saying. Whenever this happened, the feeling of being an illiterate, struggling in a modern society, tortured me.

On the other hand, I was shocked to realize how little I actually knew about the English language, its tons of vocabulary, let alone the colloquial expressions of Western culture. These unexpected but bursting feelings of failure and embarrassment were so overwhelming, that I even doubted my original goal of improving my English proficiency in this country. At such times, this goal seemed like an impossible dream.

This awareness of my own language problems strongly intrigued me and motivated me to learn the situations of other international students. I wondered if the high number of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities possibly had met similar difficulties in the English language, as I had, and as I continue to have. According to the Institute for International Education (2005) between the 2004-2005 academic year, 565,039 international students attended American educational institutions; 264,410 (46.8%) of them were graduate students. Over the years, many studies have examined international students' problems and needs. Research shows that academically, international students struggle with completing essay examinations and taking notes during lectures due to their limited language proficiency (Deressa and Beavers, 1988; Parr, Bradley & Bingi, 1992). Likewise, Das, Chow and Rutherford (1986), as well as Wehrly (1986), have found that the most commonly reported personal/social concerns of international students involve social isolation, loneliness, homesickness, irritability, and fatigue. Another study suggests that international students' psychological distress is related to a profound sense of loss, a sense of inferiority, a sense of uncertainty, communication problems, culture shock, and the loss of social support systems they had in their country of origin (Sandhu, 1995).

Although these studies provide useful insights into the needs and concerns of international students, several issues remain unexamined. For instance, hearing the international students' true, informal voices, exploring the factors that influenced their language learning, particularly interested me. I was also curious to know how they regarded the issue of improving their English ability in America.

With these questions in mind I conducted a case study with eight international graduate students in order to explore their perceptions of the difficulties they face learning both academic and functional English in America. Based on interviews of these eight graduate students, as well as the perspectives of two professors at the University of Missouri-Columbia, this article summarizes obstacles that international students perceive they confront when trying to further develop their English language ability. The study identifies the sources of these obstacles according to the participants' perspectives, and offers some practical suggestions to help international students.

This article is comprised of five parts. The first one introduces the origin of this research. The second one describes background information of the eight interviewees, as well as the research methods employed in this study. The third part records the main findings of the interviews, pointing out that Basic International Communicative Skills (BICS), the culture gap, language input, individual personality, and study habits are the main hindrances that international students must learn to cope with. The fourth part provides three suggestions based on these interviews and the researchers' own experiences and knowledge. The fifth and final part offers conclusions and reflections from each author on the issues discussed.

Methodology

Research Approach

Because of the nature of the study's purpose, a qualitative research paradigm was used to gather data for the study. Since the intention of the study was to unveil insights of the international students' perceptions, a qualitative research approach was chosen as the method for the study. A quantitative study may not have yielded such insights. Merriam (1988) notes, "Research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (p.3).

Likewise, Patton (1980) states, "qualitative measures describe the experiences of the people in depth" (p.22). In this case, the experiences of international graduate students immersed in an American educational environment were vividly captured by the qualitative approach. Hatch (2002) notes that a qualitative researcher can unveil the participant's insights by asking questions to determine how each individual makes sense out of his or her own experiences. In this study, international graduate students were asked questions related to their experiences with their immersion in American education and the learning of English.

In addition, since the purpose of the study was not to test a hypothesis or any other already formulated theory, qualitative research seemed more appropriate. It was the intention of the researcher to use grounded theory. That is, theory that is generated from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). It is an inductive approach to research that seeks to describe reality that exists. Glaser and Strauss (1999) note, "Generating a theory from the data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of research" (p.6). The findings of this study were obtained inductively from the data gathered.

Within the qualitative research framework, we followed a modified case study design. According to Merriam (1988), the case study is the most effective means to examine an educational phenomenon. Case studies are ideal since they focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomena (Merriam, 1988), such as the situation of international students of this study. Patton (1980) sees the value of case studies in unique programs. He notes information from various sources are "brought together to produce a highly readable narrative that can be used by decision makers and information users to better understand what it was like to be in the program" (p.305).

In addition, case studies are heuristic: the reader will come to a fuller understanding of the phenomena through the case study (Merriam, 1988). Patton (1980) concurs, stating that the purpose of a case study is to provide in-depth information that will lead to fuller understanding. I hope that readers of this case study will learn a great deal about the difficulties international graduate students perceive in regards to the use of the English language.

Participants

In order to conduct this case study, I spent one month in 2004 interviewing the following eight international students who were currently studying at the university.

1. Mandy: a graduate student in the School of Journalism, majoring in Broadcasting. She came from China in 2003.
2. Kim: a graduate student in the College of Education, majoring in Language and Literacy. She came from South Korea in 2002.
3. Yi: a graduate student in the College of Education, majoring in Language and Literacy. She came from South Korea in 2003.
4. Wang: a doctoral student in the College of Education, majoring in Science Education. She came from Taiwan in 2001.
5. Lee: a doctoral student in the College of Education, majoring in Art Education. She came from Taiwan in 2002.
6. Kram: a graduate student in the College of Education, majoring in Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis. She came from Laos in 1999.
7. Chwee: a doctoral student in the School of Information Science & Learning Technology. She came from Singapore in 2001.
8. Blanca: a graduate student in the Teacher Development Program, studying for her teaching certificate. She emigrated from Mexico in 1999.

Data Collection

After securing official approval from my university's "Institutional Review Board," to ensure that human subjects are protected, the interviews with eight international students, each of whom was 30-40 years of age, began with their self-introductions, such as their names, nationalities, previous English education in their home countries, current study programs, and the length of time they had been living in America. Then, I showed them ten questions I designed, based on my reading and research, my own experiences and language problems, as well as feedback from my graduate advisor (Dr. Roy Fox), fellow students, and others. The interviewees were then asked to look through the questions first and select those that interested them the most. Then, we met to discuss the topics selected.

The interviewees were also welcomed to relate "critical incidents" in their language learning. However, I hoped to know their ideas about the core questions I listed in advance. Here are some sample questions:

- How do you define or describe a "language environment"?
- What do you think about studying English in America?
- What kinds of cultural influences affect your learning of English?
- How do you respond to language confusion?

Because these students came from six different countries and regions, English became the only available language throughout our interviews. To make them feel comfortable for the interviews, I met eight interviewees either at the corner of my office, where a round table and several chairs offered us a quiet, isolated space, or at their home, if that was possible. During each interview, I took notes and tape-recorded our talk. After each interview, I transcribed tapes and typed the interviewee's answers to my questions. I also gave each of them a pseudonym, so that I could assure them of anonymity and easily keep track of their stories.

I selected these interviewees because their majors demanded high levels of English language proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Seven came from the College of Education and one from the School of Journalism at my university. Also, interviewing eight international students provided me first-hand information to understand the subjective and objective factors that hinder international students from more effectively learning English within an English-speaking environment.

Limitations

One serious limitation of this study is the lack of male participants. While gender was not a focus of this study, it is important in learning language and literacy. The thought that conversations between females would be much easier and casual led me to avoid involving males in the interviews. Also, I hoped that these female interviewees, educated in similar settings, would provide their honest ideas about learning the English language.

Another limitation of this study is that much of the information in this qualitative inquiry is based on interviews and personal experiences of international students from Asian countries, which may render it somewhat geocentric. Nevertheless, I believe their feelings about the English language and their experiences dealing with the language may be quite typical among international students from other areas of the world.

Findings

As noted above, I collected data from the eight participants in the study by interviewing them during a one-month period. After coding and analyzing the data gathered, several patterns emerged.

Concerns about Proficiency in English

First, I was impressed repeatedly by the interviewees' deep concerns about their inability to manipulate the English language. Most of them appeared to lack confidence in their English skills and felt upset for not better mastering the language. These language concerns not only made them fearful of communicating with native speakers, but also kept them suffering from a variety of inconveniences in their academic studies and in their daily life in America, even though they all had been living here for a couple of years. Overall, these international students experienced far more trouble with the English language, than they had when they lived in their home countries. For example Mandy said, "Sometimes I can't catch what American people say if they go on quickly; I don't understand what they are talking about, especially when they talk about things very related to their lives." Likewise, Kham mentioned, "I tried hard to think of the right words to say. I don't know the deeper meaning of the words... I just used simple words to express and tried to tell how I felt... they call my English 'layman English.'" Yi, also expressed her feelings, "I felt so depressed and nervous when American people keep asking me, 'What did you say?' I was so sad, because I never met such things before..."

These reflections reveal that these international students are highly sensitive about how others may perceive their skills in speaking English. Therefore, I wondered why we international students have so many difficulties in handling the English language while being surrounded in a “pure” language community of American English. From what perspective should we interpret such a confusing experience? Is there any possibility of helping international students with their language and reducing their feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, and frustration?

Even though I could be regarded a “successful” second language learner (I was able to complete two Master’s degree programs, to obtain a Ph. D degree from a reputable American university, and to become a faculty member at the college level), I cannot forget the troubles I endured during my journey. Before I came to the United States, I studied English in my home country of Venezuela for nine years at grade schools, the college, and language institutes. Despite all those years of “learning” English, I was not prepared to survive in either the academic world or the real world in America.

As a former director of a large writing program in the early eighties, I cannot forget the sting of my American faculty members’ attitudes toward the writing of international students. When faculty from all disciplines gathered to evaluate essays written for our “Minimal Competency Exam”—a one-hour writing that students had to pass before they could graduate from the university—my English Department colleagues often insisted, sometimes with a sneer, that international students “should write as well as everyone else.” Every time I heard this, I always thought, but too seldom said aloud, “Okay, fine—but I would like to see you in a writing center in Beijing, working on your Mandarin—just how well do you think you’d do?”

Fourteen years after first asking how my colleagues would perform in the same situation as our international students, I was sitting in a cable car in Tokyo, after participating in the World Englishes Conference in Nagoya. The tracks seemed suspended in air, high above a maze of urban sprawl, signs and wires sprouting out of everything. Two stops were next to each other: “Shigo” and “Shigio.” The conductor’s voice was fuzzy with static, which did not help my miniscule understanding of Japanese. There was no chance of helping this international student and even less chance of reducing his feelings of anxiety and frustration.

Later, I was sitting in the Nagoya Airport coffee shop, waiting for my flight home. Two American and two Japanese men enter and sit at the next booth. It is obvious that the two Americans have just arrived and have not met their Japanese hosts. The young waitress carefully takes their orders. I do not pay much attention to them until I hear one of the Americans, with a Texas accent, order “cream soda.” “That’s odd,” I vaguely think to myself, “why would anyone order that, in Japan?” A long period of time elapses and the waitress brings orders for everyone but the Texan. More time elapses and I hear the Americans mumble about the slowness of the service. Finally, the waitress arrives and appears embarrassed and out of breath. She had, no doubt, been working hard to satisfy this customer. On the table, in front of the Texan, she sets a glass of shimmering green soda.

Previous Experiences Learning English

Another pattern that emerged was that the participants expressed difficulties using English in America, despite the extensive English training they had in their home countries. Overall, a great majority of the international students received a comparatively thorough and systematic education in English grammar and have learned considerable vocabulary in their own countries. These eight interviewees had studied English for an average of 7.5 years, from preschool to high school. During that period, they were taught rules of pronunciation, basic sentence structures and tenses, and regularly used vocabulary (approximately five thousand words) upon graduating from their high schools.

The administrative leaders of my Midwestern university are firm believers in international or “global education.” They recognize our shrinking earth—our technological advances, our dire needs for economic and environmental interdependence. Indeed, our Chancellor speaks fluent Thai. In spite of these fortunate circumstances, a few years ago, during another round of budget cuts, we lost our program in Foreign Language Education. Part of this loss was due to several years of low enrollments in this program.

Considering their previous English education, international students have been equipped with fundamental knowledge of the English language before studying abroad. Most of them can converse with English native speakers in basic terms, as well as write brief English passages. Nonetheless, why do these students still have so many difficulties in using English in America? Let us listen to what these interviewees say about their encounters with the English language in this country.

“What I learned before is so different from what I heard here in America. For example, I just learned ‘I am twenty-three years old’, but never knew ‘I was ‘twenty-something’ or ‘I am ‘over twenty’. I never learned such expressions in Korea.” -- Kim

“Before I came here, I knew that if they say, ‘thank you’, I should answer, ‘you are welcome,’ something like this was in my English textbooks. Now I found there are lots of ways to reply ‘you are welcome’, like ‘sure’ or ‘Um-hum’. That’s in a more casual way, but I did not know this in China.” -- Mandy

“I did not expect that people here like to say, ‘make sense?’ and ‘figure out’ if they are trying to understand something. But in my mind, the word ‘understand’ is the only one I can think of.” -- Blanca

It’s hardly possible for international students to experience the full range of American dialects and the multiple forms of informal English unless they live in the USA for many years. Even Americans who have traveled widely in the USA seldom, if ever, accomplish this. The same holds true, of course, for anyone learning a new language. As well, even experienced American teachers cannot understand all of informal American English. I recently worked with experienced literacy teachers who teach “at risk” students—those who have committed crimes and attend residential correctional facilities. These teachers do not understand some of the language that their students use—from “crib” (i.e., one’s home) to “dappin” (a type of handshake); from “muggin” (looking closely at someone, up and down) to “triflin” (something messy or disgusting). The “up side” here is that, when teachers return to students to ask them to explain such terms, this interaction becomes a small demonstration of respect for these students, showing them that they know some things that teachers do not. The building of such confidence is an authentic, basic building block necessary for students to use--and hence learn and value--language.

Also, Kim, Mandy, and Blanca should know that it’s hard enough to learn one way of saying or writing something in another language. To learn multiple options for communicating basically the same meaning is accomplished by very few people over the course of a lifetime. It is also true that many teachers and many cultures perpetuate the “one correct way to do things” approach, as well as focus heavily on the details of “the one right way to do things,” thus displacing time and effort on exploring language options. These three international students, then, seem to feel “ignorant” or “ill-prepared” about something that they should not.

Based on my personal experience and the stories told by many other international students from Latin America with whom I have shared experiences, the training we received in English in our home countries was a waste of time. In order to be able to operate in a society with a different

language, the second language learner has to learn the culture in which that language is embedded. Unfortunately, the English teachers in our countries believe that second language learners of English are better off if they learn “standard” English that could be used everywhere, that is, a language without any cultural context.

Difference between Formal and Conversational English

Participants in the study consistently perceived the difference between formal and conversational English as a major obstacle for the appropriate use of the English language. Participants find that there is a great distance between their previous knowledge of the more formal English language and the more informal, authentic spoken English in American life. This conflict between conversational language and formal language is, according to the participants, the first and most severe difficulty presented to them. To better understand this issue, we need to briefly review the basic types of language acquisition.

Cummins (1979) defines two types of language acquisition: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), stating that one achieving total bilingual status in conversational English may never achieve bilingual status in their academic language. This is because conversational English is highly contextualized and less demanding than academic English, which requires more linguistic elaborations because of the reduced context surrounding its use (Cummins, 1981; Collier, 1987). However, Leki (1992) claims that the reverse may also be true: a person may be able to read academic or even literary writing in his/her second language, but may have little experience in carrying on an informal conversation in the second language. This is the case for international students; most of them do not expect the considerable discrepancy between interpersonal and academic English until they arrive in an English-speaking country. Kim, Mandy and Blanca, whom I interviewed, have provided evidence that they actually are struggling between BICS and CALP.

Therefore, we can easily infer that international students often experience two types of language acquisition. With the support of strong English grammar knowledge and a substantial vocabulary they learned in their prior education, international students usually have a fairly well developed academic language proficiency but lack interpersonal communicative skills. That is, they are able to read academic and professional articles and books in English, yet they may have troubles conversing with English native speakers. This great distance between BICS and CALP naturally becomes one of the impediments to international students' proficiency in the English language.

The findings of this study corroborate the existence of the gap between BICS and CALP as mentioned above. In the course of interviewing, I noted that these students' unfamiliarity with the way of oral language is the main reason why they may become “deaf” in communication. Different from written language, oral language involves a great many idioms and colloquial expressions, accumulating from one generation to another. Although Americans are well used to these, international students know little about them. Lee, a girl from Taiwan stated, “Once my professor told me ‘you bet’; I looked at her blankly, because I did not know what she meant until she repeated ‘you are right.’” For Kim, an interviewee from South Korea, “I am done” is the first new expression she learned from American friends. “I heard them say it on many occasions, and now I also try to use it in my talk, because it is so universal.” Yi, another interviewee from South Korea, also admitted that she has learned a lot of current and informal English expressions since she arrived in America: “At first, I just wondered why so many people rushed to this country to study English. I thought that was unnecessary. But when I came here, I found out the reason: English that people speak here sounds totally different from what I learned in Korea.”

In addition, international students face the challenges of English phonetics when communicating with Americans. Not being as good at making word/sound connections in English as native speakers,

international students cannot react to the English sounds as promptly as they would do in their own language. Pronunciation also bothers international students because they cannot distinguish the nuances in English. “What I hear from native speakers here in America is a continuous stream of sound waves rather than separate spoken words,” Chwee, a girl from Singapore complained.

Moreover, since most international students have learned English in an environment that precluded much contact with spoken English, they often speak English with an accent that reveals their own language. So this kind of “dialect English” almost becomes one of international students’ distinctive marks. Yi was concerned about her heavy accent: “I have no way to get rid of it, since it is so rooted. People here know where I come from by my accent.” Conversely, international students find it difficult to make sense of American people who have dialects or accents. It is common to hear international students privately talk about which professor’s lectures are hard to catch due to his/her regional accent. In one word, these factors combine to prevent international students from acquiring better interpersonal communication skills, further damaging their confidence in their English ability.

When we come to the United States we are used to speaking and listening to “standard” English – the kind of English nobody speaks in real life. Therefore, we arrive figuratively deaf and mute, unable to understand the common language used by native speakers and pronouncing English in such a way that nobody understands us. Many international students express their frustration in trying to communicate and survive in this country right after arrival. They have already passed the TOEFL test in their native country, and are supposed to have a good command of English, but have less knowledge of idiom and slang. One of the most challenging cultural situations is to answer r the phone. Unable to see the body language that helps us make sense of some of the words, a phone call from a native speaker of English becomes, for an international student, a source of anxiety and frustration. It is especially frustrating when we try to articulate and express a complete idea and the person at the other end says, “WHAT?” “What did you say?” or if the listener understands something completely different from what we meant.

Native Culture vs. Adopted Culture

Participants also identified a second major obstacle in using the English language. The difference between their native culture and the American culture makes it more difficult for them to properly function in an American environment.

Kham, an interviewee from Laos, explained how one cultural difference affected her academic work:

I do not think I am stupid, but the culture stops me sometimes, like when I wrote a paper, I did not give it more reasons, because in our culture, we are not expected to explain things too much. If you explain a lot that people did not ask you, they may think you are trying to hide something. But here, what professors want to see in my paper are examples, examples, and more examples.

Kham feels it is hard to bridge the gap between her Laotian culture and that of America, even after living in America for five years. Actually, her confusions caused by American culture are not rare among international students. This phenomenon is the second important factor that works negatively on international students who are trying to adapt to a new language environment.

Overall, some major patterns of discourse—especially the paradigms for presenting an argument or explaining a topic--certainly differ in Eastern and Western countries. In academic writing, this presents a major obstacle for Asian students, because they have to negotiate between their deeply-instilled cultural values (as Kham’s fear or reluctance to explain herself too much) and the expectations of American academic prose, which often demands a more linear, deductive approach to writing. Some Eastern cultures consider it “rude” to begin their communication by stating what they want, instead

preferring to arrive at their conclusion in a more circular, inductive way. Americans, on the other hand, often value beginning their messages with the “bottom line” or conclusion, because it is direct and efficient. Such differences reach far beyond how to organize one’s writing: rather, they are deeply rooted in one’s culture. Another “myth” that is deeply rooted in American AND Asian culture is the belief that standardized test “tells all”—that a passing or proficient score will mean that we can achieve what it promises, at any time, under any circumstances!

Within the Latin American culture, it is also rude to present an argument in a direct way. Even more, it could be insulting for the reader. It could imply that you are not smart enough to get the main idea by “reading” the cues provided, and therefore you were forced to express your argument in a childish form. That difference in discourse usually leads college professors to believe that Latino students do not know how to write “good” quality papers. It takes several years of assimilation for international students to become proficient in American discourse.

One of the direct consequences that may result from culture gaps is misunderstanding a language that is not grounded in shared cultural experience. Therefore, non-natives often have to guess at meanings (Bartholomae, 1980). That is why many international students often complain that none of the words in reading are difficult to understand, but the interpretation of the meaning is only possible accompanied by an understanding of the cultural setting. Mandy, the interviewee from China, explained her view of the interaction of American culture and its language: “You know nothing about their lifestyle when you come here; of course, you don’t know what they are talking about.” Mandy’s personal experience also proved her point. Majoring in broadcast journalism, she is particularly interested in mass media in America. Once watching a movie on TV, she discovered that dashes sometimes appeared in English captions. She was confused by this until her American friends told her that the American government regulates some guidelines for mainstream media in order to prohibit “dirty words” from being shown in public. “I became aware of which words are not allowed to be shown publicly in this country,” Mandy said.

The culture gap often influences the international students’ approach to English in other ways. For example, two Asian culture values listening more than speaking, because being modest is considered an important virtue. This is one reason that Asian cultures emphasize memorization and recall of grammatical structures, while class discussion is discouraged (Fu, 1995). Consequently, quietness and withdrawal are typical of Asian students. The seven interviewees from Asian countries convinced me again that, like me, they are reluctant to participate in class discussions unless they are directly called upon by the instructor. Kim explained that in her country, she was taught to absorb knowledge from her teacher. However, she explains, “here we are encouraged to challenge professors’ ideas or raise opposing questions or do some creative things. I am not used to this American way.”

Mandy is right: “speaking vs. speaking only when spoken to” represents a significant cultural difference between Asia and America. This gulf has widened in the past 25 years, as Americans have increasingly lost their abilities to listen sensitively and to listen for extended periods of time. Decades ago, listening was routinely taught in classrooms, as one of the “Language Arts,” along with speaking, reading, and writing. I believe there are two primary reasons for this loss. First, the teaching of listening in classrooms has been displaced (as have many other subjects and values) by our increasing emphasis on “accountability” and massive, standardized testing programs.

Another, more pervasive reason is that our culture, especially television, film, and popular music, continue to glamorize “the performance”—particularly loud, aggressive, unceasing talk—from Jerry Springer, to gangsta rap; from Rush Limbaugh, to the Comedy Central Television Network; from “Survivor” to “The O’Reilly Factor,” to “American Idol.” These values have spread to politics,

religion, education, and technology. Our collective devaluing of the art of listening has not seemed to lead Americans to any gains in personal or social freedom, independence, critical thinking, or autonomy.

Lack of vocabulary

Most of the participants felt overwhelmed by the number of new words they had to learn and by the limitations that the lack of vocabulary imposes. For example, Wang said: “I suddenly feel so desperate sometimes, because there are large amounts of words I do not know. Whenever I opened a newspaper or turned on a TV set, I was suddenly surrounded by endless unknown words.”

Wang’s helplessness is not unusual for international students, most of whom may experience an overload of the English language input upon arriving in United States. Mandy, who got her Bachelor’s degree in English Literature in China, told me, “There are a great many words and expressions I do not know. Even those very common words for Americans became burdens for me to memorize. I never knew that my vocabulary was so tiny and that I needed to do so much work to enrich it.” Confronting various features of the language, such as idioms, slang, and dialects, makes it hard to determine how much of this language is enough for international students’ daily communications with native speakers. Therefore, they seem to often worry about their lack of vocabulary and think it is really hard to find the right English words and forms to express themselves. Moreover, the fear of choosing incorrectly forces them to avoid using unfamiliar words. On the other hand, knowing few connotations of words and their nuances, international students have fewer options for picking up appropriate expressions. Most of the interviewees sadly admitted that sometimes they had to give up some good ideas in class discussions just because they could not find the available words at the moment.

This shortage of vocabulary could also increase international students’ timidity in communicating with native speakers. The more effectively international students wanted to speak in English, the more vaguely they would express themselves, in essence, “hiding” under a cloak of fuzziness, generality, and simplicity (Leki, 1992). Consequently, the feeling of embarrassment and frustration at not being able to say what they want in English, as well as the fear of appearing foolish before native speakers, seemed to force more and more international students to remain “dumb.” Lee, one interviewee, described her feelings under such conditions this way: “I know I flushed with embarrassment when I failed to explain our customs clearly to my American friends. I am much more anxious than they are.”

The other possible consequence of lacking vocabulary is that international students are not liable to comprehend much of the language coming at them, if it is too fast and has little repetition. Even though these students pay careful attention to what is going on around them, they may actually understand only a portion of what they hear (Leki, 1992). All of the eight interviewees had the experiences of requesting their American professors or classmates to slow down in the midst of their conversations. “I have to interrupt their talks,” confided Yi, a shy girl from South Korea, “because I can not catch them. Otherwise, I just smile at them to conceal my embarrassment.”

Individual Personality

In an interview, Lee noted, “I like to keep to myself, and I am quiet most of the time in a crowd, so I don’t talk with Americans too much. But I know I have lost many opportunities to polish my spoken English.” As Lee states, her biggest hindrance in learning English is her introverted personality. And she also admitted that her passivity does not help her generate more interactions with native English speakers. Lee’s example demonstrates Ellis’ point that individual characteristics of learners also have an important impact on how well a second language is acquired (Ellis, 1985). Ellis insists that how

introverted or extroverted a learner is will probably play in his/her behaviors in learning a second language.

Self-confidence may also play a vital role in determining the effectiveness of language acquisition. However, lacking sufficient confidence in using English is rather common among Asian students. Chwee, the interviewee from Singapore, where English is the official language, still cannot overcome her hesitation to speak English in public: “I just sit at the corner of the classroom, trying not to be noticed by my professor, because I am afraid to be asked to say something in class, you know. I don’t think my English is bad, but I dare not to speak before them (Americans).”

In a sense, Chwee’s activity is understandable. Different from little children, who may be unconscious of their spoken errors, or pay little attention to their mistakes, college students and other adults are likely more sensitive to others’ attitudes and reactions. Asian students, especially, value their self-esteem and are afraid of negative or insulting comments from others. Their classroom behaviors often reveal this, as they express doubt about their ability to understand and be understood in English. They often keep silent. In addition, they may suspect that native speakers might refuse their ideas.

I understand Chwee’s fear of speaking—not just because she may not understand English well, all the time—but because of other, larger factors, such as America’s collective attitudes and knowledge about Asia. The Asia Society (2001) conducted extensive research on this topic and concluded that there is a “huge gap between the strategic importance of Asia—the largest, most populous, and fastest-growing area of the world—and Americans’ disproportionate lack of knowledge about this vital region” (p.7). Another finding was that 70% of the American public and 97% of American leaders believes that “China will play a greater role in world affairs in the coming decade” (p.18). However, yet another finding underscores the schism here: “275,076 Asian students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities during the academic year 1998-99, whereas less than 8,000 American students were studying in Asia” (p.12).

Americans know little about Asia. For instance, one out of every four high school students could not name the ocean that separates North America from Asia, and two out of three respondents did not know that Mao Zedong, often referred to as “Chairman Mao,” was the first leader of the People’s Republic of China (Asia in the Schools, 2001.) It seems likely, too, that many Americans would have little understanding of the longevity, depth, and breadth of Chinese culture.

And Americans, like most people, tend to fear what they do not understand. I have spoken with enough Asian and other international students to know that many of them have experienced prejudice and racism from Americans. I also believe that many Americans, including well-traveled and educated Americans, are simply afraid of Asia. They fear not knowing the language, they fear the sheer multitudes of people, and they fear the incredible size and maze of its cities. They fear being a stranger in what they consider to be an even stranger land than those with which they are already familiar.

When American students interact with international students, especially from underdeveloped countries, they usually ask questions such as “Do you have running water?” or “Do you have cars over there?” From those questions, international students get the perception that Americans believe we come from “uncivilized” or “primitive” societies, and therefore we don’t have much to offer in an academic discussion. This attitude explains in part the reluctance of international students to participate in class.

Study Habits

Interviewing eight international students made me realize that study habits probably bring about some kind of side-effects too. Depending excessively on bilingual dictionaries has become a headache for most international students.

Taking along a bilingual dictionary is expected to offer international students convenience; however, the bizarre translations of words and several different translation options--without any context--create much confusion. I heard a lot of complaints about bilingual dictionaries from my interviewees. They agree that most of the time they have no idea which of the several possible translations might be appropriate for each context. Wang, the girl from Taiwan said, "I especially get puzzled with adjectives. Each word has more than five Chinese translations, and I almost do not know which one fits my situation."

But why do they still prefer to use the bilingual dictionaries? Lee, the other girl from Taiwan, replied that the explanations in English-English dictionaries create even more confusion, if she does not read the translations in Chinese. Like her, the other interviewees admitted that they cannot connect one English noun to the object/ image in their mind, unless they know what it is in their own language.

In timed essay exams, some institutions do not allow native students to use a dictionary or thesaurus. There is method in this madness. Looking up too many words (again, for that "one right answer") takes considerable amounts of time, deflecting the writer's or speaker's focus away from meaning and context and onto correctness. Overall, in the wrong situations, relying upon dictionaries can reinforce one's dependency on "one right answer," retarding the writer's progress in developing fluency and self-confidence, often causing her to avoid the risks inherent in further communication. This becomes a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle, since, to learn a language, it must be used, over and over again, trying out language options in different contexts and with different audiences.

It is interesting that none of the Latino international students that I have met show any reliance on a dictionary, as the Asian students seem to have in order to survive in the academic world. This difference could be explained by the fact that English and Spanish share a large percentage of words that have either Latin or Greek roots that are similar in both languages. When Latino students use dictionaries, they prefer English version.

Recommendations

One contribution we hoped this study could make is find ways to better assist international students' language development. All the interviewees are making efforts to seek various ways to reduce the difficulties they experienced in learning English in America. Here, briefly, are their primary suggestions:

Engage in Informal and Formal English Whenever Possible

Just like culture shock to newcomers, "language shock" may cause learners to lose confidence in their ability to survive in their current culture (Fu, 1995). Exposed to the enormous sea of "uncontrolled and spontaneous" language in the second language environment they have never before met, international students may become overwhelmed.

No one likes to be tortured constantly by the limitations of language. Therefore, international students often seek ways to enrich their language learning. All of the interviewees agreed that they engaged in English anywhere in their daily lives that they could, in an attempt to learn as much new vocabulary. Kim and Yi think that "copying" the way Americans speak will provide a shortcut to help them improve their vocabulary. Kim stated that, "When I hear one word from Americans several times, I try to use that word in my speaking. I think exposure to the language is a good way for me to learn it." Kham and Blanca, who have lived in the U.S. longer than the other interviewees, emphasized that they learned a lot of new vocabulary from reading and writing:

“For me, reading is very important. Most of my vocabulary comes from reading. Also, I learn how to use these words and phrases in context, how to construct sentences and how to pick up proper words.” -- Kham

“Reading gives me most of my vocabulary, and I get familiar with those words when I keep on reading. I am glad to monitor the words printed in my own writing. Writing helps me memorize the new words.” -- Blanca

Form International Groups

Once being aware of their deficiency in oral and aural skills, international students often lose confidence in their ability to adapt psychologically to their new environment, even though they can read and write in English. As a result of the difficulties they experience in speaking and understanding English, these students often seek out and interact mainly with others from their own countries. Speaking the same language and sharing a similar appearance makes them feel safe and comfortable (Leki, 1992).

Blanca, the interviewee from Mexico, shared her “small secret”: “I enjoy talking with international students from other countries, because I need not worry about my poor English and accent. I feel so relaxed that my spoken English becomes surprisingly fluent as we talk. We can also use gestures to get across our meaning. Communicating with them is easy and full of pleasure.” It seems that only on occasions such as this could international students recover their lost confidence and experience a sense of accomplishment when using the English language.

This international student did not become “hamstrung” because of the tyranny of “one right answer.” She is not looking up words, one by one, in a dictionary; she is not fearful of her audience and of “sounding dumb” or “sounding ignorant.” Instead, she is gaining practice and confidence—taking risks and building fluency—fundamental to anyone’s increasing their learning of language.

Besides daily associations and holiday gatherings with their compatriots, most international students prefer to live close to each other or with those sharing a similar cultural background. Like Blanca, these students usually do not mind associating with other international students who may have some elements of culture and customs in common with them—people who are experiencing the same adjustments as themselves (Leki, 1992). For example, six of the eight interviewees choose to live in the International Students Apartments supplied by the university. First, they are free to share one apartment with people from their own country. Second, commonalities in living and cooking habits allow them to avoid many inconveniences and troubles.

However, Kham, who has been living in America longer, voiced a different opinion:

I do not think living with international students is the best choice to help us get familiar with American culture and learn English. I got this lesson from the experience of one of my friends here, who arrived in America almost the same time as me, but her English speaking and listening abilities improved faster than mine. The only reason was that she lived with an American family for two years. Living together forced her to speak more English than me.

Kham’s remarks made me realize that these international groups may not be so preferable for learning the English language. Limiting communication among international students removes a rich source of language input – social interaction with native English speakers. Although international students may attain psychological satisfaction by staying with their compatriots, simultaneously, they

have greatly reduced their opportunities to get used to the English language (Long, 1983). Kim, the interviewee from South Korea, said, “My husband and I talk to each other little if we agree to speak in English at home. When we visit our friends here, we still speak our own language, though we know that is not good for our English improvement...”

My Latino friends who wanted to improve their English skills usually avoided gathering with other international students. Instead, the ones who were the most successful were those who often socialized with native speakers. These students were not only able to learn the second language faster, but were also able to assimilate the culture. Latino students also criticized those who used English at home to communicate with their spouses and children. Even though it is assumed that “practice makes perfect,” speaking English at home was perceived as some sort of cultural betrayal.

When to speak one’s native language (the “language of nurture”) and when to speak one’s adopted or L-2 language remains a complex issue. In essence, for native English speakers, the language of nurture – spoken and written for close, trusted audiences – is informal English (Britton, et al., 1977). Therefore, Kham’s friend, who learned English quickly because she lived with an American family, was immersed in informal English, the type that is most challenging for international students. It is also true that international students need the psychological safety and security of their own language--their own language of nurture. International students need to engage in both of these language contexts. This is a complicated, difficult task and often impractical.

Seek Comfort from Culture and Family

For international students, coming to America to study means separating from dear families and friends; therefore they often endure intense emotional pain. In particular, as they try to come to terms with cross-cultural experiences, these students can become emotionally fragile. In a new culture, they may be less flexible, inventive, and spontaneous than they may be at home. Since their usual coping mechanisms do not work, they may revert to child-like dependence on others and become exhausted from trying to accomplish even routine activities (Scarcella, 1990).

In such situations, international students are eager to find a reliable setting, in which they are allowed to reflect on and appreciate their own culture. Talking with others from their own country is a preferable option, because it is the most practical way to escape the dreaded new culture and new language, “partly to combat loneliness and homesickness, but also to complain bitterly about all the faults of the new culture and its people” (Leki, 1992). This seems to be what happened with Lee, a Chinese girl:

Can you imagine my feeling of being called by my first name by an unfamiliar person here? I felt so uncomfortable. In China, only my close family members would call me that. The worst is that my American professors and classmates pronounce my Chinese name in many different ways. Sometimes I even don’t know if they are calling me or not. So I had to give myself an English name, but I feel that is not me. How much I wanted to use my own name!

Lee looked bitter as she told me this. I understand her completely, because I met the same embarrassment because of my name. To be honest, I don’t feel very comfortable being addressed by my given name in public, because even my parents won’t call me that in a formal setting. Even in America, Chinese students still follow their tradition by greeting each other with their whole name. But since taking on an English name is popular among international students, I tend to view this as our attempt to accept western culture and language.

In over three decades of working with international students, all except one or two have insisted that they be referred to by their simple, adopted American name. Even the Chinese students—in China—insisted that I call them by their American names. It is indeed a popular thing to do and represents, as Hong Li notes, an attempt to accept western culture. In another sense, a new name also affords them a kind of “fresh start.” One young Chinese woman I worked with in Tibet insisted that we refer to her as “Joy”—she was proud of the fact that she selected this name from a dictionary and that she also liked its meaning. There is, of course, a very practical reason for international students to adopt American names: it’s less troublesome and more efficient, due to the fact that international students find that many Americans have great difficulty in pronouncing (and hence remembering) “foreign” names.

It has long been my practice to ask international students to use their real names, and I usually have to gently coax it out of them. I have done so because of America’s own history of calling minority groups “out of name.” Especially during those years preceding the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans were often “called out of name” by whites. It was not unusual for whites to assign nicknames to Blacks, instead of using their real names. (While racial slurs may be related to such nicknames, this is not my focus here.) For example, “Boy” and “Girl” were commonly used to refer to African American adults. Other categorical or “one size fits all,” pejorative terms included, “Uncle Tom,” “Uncle,” and “Rastus.”

Such language use was perpetuated by popular media and culture. The radio and television series, “Amos N’ Andy,” featured characters widely known as “The Kingfish” and “Step-N-Fetch-It.” (It’s interesting to note that the only exceptions to these names occurred when the characters referred to themselves: The Kingfish became “George Stevens” and “Andy” became “Andrew J. Brown.”)

American culture has continued to “call people out of name” as well as to find new ways of devaluing cultures unlike their own. America’s Spike TV Network currently airs a program called, “MXC” that is described as, “A Japanese-produced game show in which contestants attempt outrageous stunts.” This describes what the program would be when it airs in Japan. However, in the USA, this program contains very rapid “voice over” narration in American English. American male voices are inserted to substitute for the Japanese people on screen, who were speaking Japanese. The American voices make fun of the Japanese contestants and hosts, belittling their appearance, actions, and mannerisms, in between a barrage of sexual jokes, cultural put-downs, and comments that rely upon extreme stereotyping.

I have always found interesting the practice that Asian students adopt an American name. That is not the case for Latin American students. We have to get used to hearing our names pronounced in a zillion ways, but still we do not change our name. We often adopt, as in my case, the pronunciation that is most commonly used by Americans without relinquishing our own Spanish name.

On the other hand, six out of eight interviewees admitted they would seek comfort from their families and friends if they felt depressed or had any troubles caused by speaking and listening to English. Wang’s way of dealing with hard times with English seems representative among international students: “I would call my sister (who is in Michigan) or close friend here to tell them my troubles with English and I want them to hear me and share my sadness, and then I will feel better and relieved.” The other three girls, Mandy, Chwee and Yi, said that the cost of calling their homes amounts to 30% of their monthly living expenses.

Again, since language has to be used in order to be learned, it makes sense that international students, who live with English speakers, or at least associate more often with them, will more quickly

gain fluency and competence in English. It seems that all cultures gravitate to their own kind. As these students make clear, a certain amount of fear drives these “clannish” practices. However, it seems to me that China, Japan, and other cultures are much more inclined to think and behave in terms of groups than are their American counterparts. In my recent trip to China, I was one in a party of five. Every time we checked into a hotel, the clerk automatically registered us as a single group, swiping the credit card of just one of us; they neither asked for, nor wanted, separate credit cards, since they already had one—who represented the whole group. My companions had a hard time convincing them that we were, yes, a “group,” but that we were separate individuals, each of whom wanted to be responsible for his or her own hotel bill! Hence, international students who function with a strong “group” mindset may have a very difficult time modifying this pattern.

On the other hand, for all of Westerners’ vaunted “rugged individualism,” that we want to apply to ourselves, we are less effective at perceiving other cultures as individuals. As a child, I often heard whites say, “all blacks look alike.” Now I hear, “all Chinese look alike” and “I can’t tell a Chinese from a Japanese from a Korean.” In his essay, “Marrakech,” George Orwell (1997) implicates his own culture’s point of view when he describes the native people: “Do they even have names? Or are they merely a kind of undifferentiated brown stuff, about as individual as bees or coral insects?”

Overall, these cultural tendencies reflect a model of mental growth, posited by James Moffett (1973) and others, in which “simultaneous differentiation and integration” functions throughout life as we develop into more complex organisms. In short, differentiation means accepting or learning how one’s self diverges from others, while integration means learning how one’s self is akin to other people or ideas. International students, then, seem to be differentiating themselves and integrating themselves on several levels—from their personal and professional home lives, to their personal and professional new lives. As well, this intense differentiation and integration occurs within a compressed time frame, creating a pressure-cooker atmosphere for visiting students.

Latin American people are by “nature” very close. Neighbors and family members are always available to help each other. Being in a foreign country causes Latinos to become even closer to each other. Nothing is more relaxing after a hard week immersed in another culture than to “hang out” with your own people and feel at home. The close knit Latino group serves another fundamental purpose: survival. Latino students rely on each other to learn the American system and be able to function in it. Tasks, such as how to negotiate the purchase of a car, how to obtain a driver’s license, how to get credit, or how to open a checking account and understand the importance of a credit score are basic skills for survival. However, cultural expertise is not taught in college but must be learned from your “new family” in the United States: your Latino group.

Final Reflections

From Hong Li

The most important benefit of interviewing eight international students is that their experiences, as well as mine, help me to place the question (“What is the best way to learn a second language?”) into perspective. “Keep practicing” should be our international students’ optimum choice regarding English learning. In doing so, we must grab any communication opportunity with native speakers and immerse ourselves into the cultural diversities of the United States. However, talking with these eight international students, I notice that they, in a sense, have actually excluded themselves from a pure language community, depriving themselves of ample chances to communicate with native speakers. “We are an isolated group of people in the United States,” as Lee said. This kind of self-pity would only limit international students’ exposure to the English language.

Vygotsky (1978) concludes that language develops entirely from social interaction. Extending Vygotskian theory to second language acquisition, Lantolf and Appel (1994) claim that second language learners advance to higher levels of linguistic knowledge when they collaborate and interact with speakers of the second language who are more knowledgeable than they are, for example, a teacher or a more advanced learner. Hatch (1992), Pica (1994) and Long (1983) have argued that much second language acquisition takes place through conversational interaction. Based on his observations of learners and native speakers, Long (1983) asserts that what learners need is not necessarily simplification of the linguistic forms, but rather, an opportunity to interact with other speakers, in ways which lead them to adapt what they are saying until the learners show signs of understanding.

Despite the linguistic and cultural obstacles international students must overcome, I think the key to opening the door for English learning is in their own hands. First, what they need most is to treat their language abilities boldly and make efforts to battle with their psychological difficulties caused by the language, since second language acquisition should take place in a setting which minimizes fear, nervousness, and self-consciousness (Krashen, 1982). Also, they must break their sealed language environment and become active language learners. Using the real language for real communication with native speakers, they can perhaps acquire the language in an authentic sense. Gaining a sense of belonging in a new culture with the help of its language is what all international students expect. To attain that, they must dare to confront their apprehension, embarrassment, and fear.

The exciting thing is that some international students have realized this fact and made encouraging attempts toward the right direction. They begin to participate in various programs to look for more opportunities to improve their language ability. For example, Wang joined in the multicultural discussion group in Columbia to get more chances to practice her English. Lee and Kim are members of the Language Partners Program on campus. Meeting with the native English-speaking volunteers weekly in a casual environment, they sharpen their English skills and absorb new expressions and slang as well. Kim also changed her idea about the English language: "After studying here for two years, I actually came to know that English is simply a language like any language in the world, and it is impossible to 'learn' it without using it in your life."

From Dario J. Almarza

This study corroborates the findings of previous research on international students' issues in American higher education. Both I and the participants of this study have had the same difficulties adjusting to the campus environment as the international students reported by Tan (1994). As this study seems to indicate, as international students we encounter an environment in which the language, norms, laws, and the people are different from those in our native lands. Also, previous research has identified the English language as one of the greatest problems among international students (Solberg, Choi, Ritsman, & Jolly, 1994) as is the case with participants of this particular research. Likewise, this study shows that international students experience multiple adjustments within the campus culture, and that navigating the academic curriculum is a challenge. Because of the international students' culture, our classroom behavior may be perceived as passive or shy. Due to language barriers, we may have problems taking notes, answering questions, and writing essays. Although we have excelled academically in our home countries, marginal competence in English can affect our ability to concentrate on lectures and other factors within the curriculum.

As I reflect on the findings of this study, it seems evident that higher education institutions should take an active role in helping international students cope with the difficulties of learning English, succeeding in the academic world as "invited guests" in a "stranger land." Student learning is in large part a function of the effort, frequency, and quality of the interactions between

the student and the agents within the campus environment. As Kuh (1994) contends, it is important to determine whether faculty and student cultures foster or discourages student engagement in the activities that matter to learning and personal learning. For international students, higher education needs to re-examine how instruction within the classroom environment ensures that a learner whose first language is one other than English understand the handouts as well as participates in class discussion. In other words, higher education must create a caring/positive environment for international students. As noted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), students who feel they belong and are valued as individuals within the learning environment are more likely to take advantage of the resources the institution provides for their learning.

Finally, in higher education, despite some well-intended policies and programs, the “sink or swim” approach in regards to international students still prevails. They have to obtain their visas, buy their tickets, arrive on campus in another country, register for courses during the same time as host country nationals and begin their studies without any cross-cultural training or major help from the host institution to adjust to the new environment. International students should be able to attend cross-cultural training programs in which they are:

1. Able to recognize that any important life transition is likely to result in stress and discomfort as a usual and normal consequence. The pain caused by the change might be less if recognized as a normal response.
2. Reassured and shown support to maintain a healthy self-image and to restore their sense of self-efficacy.
3. Given time to adjust without pressure or urgency.
4. Shown the patterns of the adjustment they have to go through. In that way the process may become more concrete and less ambiguous.
5. Prepared to cope with the culture shock. That preparation might include language study, learning about the host culture, simulating situations to be encountered, and spending time with nationals from the host culture.

From Roy F. Fox:

I would like to offer two final reflections—one brief, the other longer and more serious. I have no easy answers or simple solutions to either one.

First, in my years of researching language, media, and “culture,” it seems clear that word, “culture” has become a very easy “scapegoat” for all of us—academics, teachers, students, even the general public. This complex term has become almost a personification for any of society’s ills, and the term is used as if it is something that has a definite shape, face, personality, and full set of superhuman powers, both good and bad. I am in no way denying the powers of one’s cultures, be they good, bad, or indifferent. Indeed, throughout my career, I have ceaselessly argued that we must learn about this phenomenon.

The fact that so many different people are using the word, “culture,” so often and so easily, is good, because at least people are becoming aware of its powers and are giving “lip service” to it—a step in the right direction. On the other hand, many people who use this word would have a hard time defining it in concrete terms. Because “culture” is so high on the ladder of abstraction, it means many different things to many different people. Hence, the problem resides in the fact that most people would assign quite different meanings to the term that they are “blaming” (or crediting) for a whole smorgasbord of causes and effects. There are, of course, no shortcuts to dealing with culture, and in a

world rife with cultural clashes of all varieties, the term, “culture” is becoming demonized--a quick and easy thing to blame for our many complex problems.

Second, the eight international students explored here (as well as my own experiences with American and international students, both in the USA and overseas) suggest that what resides at the root of so many problems with international students, is fear—fear of saying 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.” Such a fear seems natural for anyone visiting another culture. I view such fear as relatively benign. While it causes considerable problems for the students explored in this study and needs to be addressed by all of us, it does, at root, signify respect for the host culture.

However, another kind of fear is far more dangerous--institutionalized fear—or “fear-mongering”: spreading panic about certain cultures or groups of people, where no real threat exists. Fear-mongering can be direct or indirect and insidious. It is most often instigated by institutions, especially by governments and public “leaders,” be they American televangelists preaching against the evils of gay people, or politicians, such as the late U.S. Senator, Joe McCarthy, warning against the evils of communists. The problem is that pandering to a general population’s fears travels straight to our emotions and usually leads to destruction.

When governments promote fear, especially against “foreigners,” wars can be “sold” to its populace. One current example of fear-mongering in America, which may well eventually affect the students in this study (and maybe their children and grandchildren) is the “selling” of certain types of education legislation. For example, starting with the 1958 launch of the Russian satellite, “Sputnik,” American leaders poured millions of dollars into the “space race” by pandering to the American public’s fear of “foreigners”—Russians and Communists.

In the past year, the same thing seems to be happening all over again. However, this time, the “foreigners” are different. President Bush recently called for STEM education, especially math and science, to be a national priority. The U.S. House Science Committee quickly followed suit by introducing three bills “to strengthen U.S. economic competitiveness” by large infusions of dollars into math and science education programs and research (Press Release, May 11, 2006). In further orchestration, many state governors are pursuing similar initiatives.

The past Cold War fears of a “common enemy” resonate within today’s calls for enhancing math, science, engineering, and technology education. Let’s start with Congress and the three bills mentioned earlier. In the press release, one bill’s sponsor, Senator John Schwarz (R-MI), stated that, “Countries like China and India are graduating millions more math, science, and engineering students than the United States. We cannot afford to sit idly by or we face a realistic chance of a decline in our standard of living.” (Never mind that China graduates more students in these areas due to their larger population.) This time around, it’s not Russia to fear. It’s China, India, and “countries like [them].”

At the state level, Texas Governor Rick Perry stated that, “if . . . China and India continue to graduate higher numbers of students equipped with these skills, the next generation of Texans will face a future of limited opportunities....” (Korsec, 2005). Delhi vs. Dallas. Hong Kong vs. Houston. New York Governor George Pataki warned that, “In tomorrow’s economy, our students’ competition for jobs, investment and opportunity will not come from places like South Carolina or Indiana; it will come from places like South Korea and India....” (Press Release, January 04, 2006). Missouri Governor Matthew Blunt stated that America is “becoming more dependent on foreign talent to work in the areas of math and science” (Columbia Daily Tribune, January 23, 2006, p. 5A). Governor Blunt further noted that, by the year 2010, “more than 90 percent of all scientists and engineers in the world will be living in Asia if

current trends continue” (Press Release, January 24, 2006). While being careful to avoid naming “Asians,” Blunt nonetheless evokes fears of “foreigners”--of “yellow hordes” swarming over the green valleys of Missouri, trampling the white blossoms of Dogwood trees.

Are we, once again using fears of common enemies (Communists, Asians, Arabs, et al.)? Are we cultivating fears of “foreigners” more than perceptions of global interdependence? Educators, especially, are responsible for asking these questions and pursuing answers. And this means looking at ourselves and other cultures, especially the Asian culture, without fear. Only then will visitors, regardless of where they are from, be able to move across lands that seem more like their own, more like home.

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