



ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN THE U.S.A.: THE EFFECTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND ACADEMIC CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Internationalization of higher education is one of the key concepts for today's institutions of higher education, and international students are at the very center of this concept. The number of international students in the United States has been growing continuously. Living and studying in a new social and academic environment generally come with new types of difficulties. Most common problems related to international students' adjustment process reported in the related literature are language problems, cultural adjustment problems, accommodation difficulties, discrimination, dietary restrictions, loneliness, homesickness, geographic distance from family and friends, understanding and adjusting to new social norms, adapting to new study and test taking techniques, and problems related to classroom instruction. There is a huge body of research that addresses various issues regarding international students studying in American universities and colleges. A considerable amount of studies in this wide literature is devoted to the needs and adjustment issues of international students. This paper presents current and historical perspectives of research on international students' adjustment problems.

Keywords: international students, adjustment, academic culture, English language

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a huge body of research that addresses various issues regarding international students studying in American universities and colleges. A considerable amount of studies in this wide literature is devoted to the needs and adjustment issues of international students. This paper presents current and historical perspectives of research on international students' adjustment problems.

Internationalization and student mobility have become key elements at all levels of today's higher education institutions (de Wit, 2008). Knight's (2006b) International Association of Universities (IAU) survey indicates that 73 % of the participating higher education institutions give internationalization a high priority, 23 % give a medium priority, and only 2 % give a low priority.

Before going any further in the discussion of the internationalization of higher education, it is important to define what it means to internalize higher education. According to de Wit (2008), many different terms have been used in connection with the internationalization of higher education. Some of these terms are curriculum related: 'international studies,' 'global studies,' 'multicultural education,' 'intercultural education,' 'peace education,' whereas some others are mobility related: 'study abroad,' 'education abroad,' 'academic mobility.' As there are many terms that are used interchangeably for the same concept, it is vital to make a working definition of what internationalization of higher education means. The most commonly used working definition of the concept was made by Knight (2006a) as "the



process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (pp.213-214). Knight also states that there are two basic components evolving in the internationalization of higher education: (a) internationalization at home (which refers to the activities that help students to develop international understanding and intercultural skills); and (b) internationalization abroad (which includes all forms of education across borders, or the mobility of students, faculty, scholars and programs).

Globalization is another important term which has been used related to the internationalization of higher education. Emphasizing the important connection between the terms of globalization and internationalization in higher education, de Wit (2008) states that “the globalization of our societies and economies has an impact on higher education and, as a result, on its international dimensions. Higher education is increasingly influenced by globalization but also is becoming a more vigorous actor in globalization. The internationalization of higher education is one of the ways a country or an institution responds to the impact of globalization, but also the internationalization of higher education is itself an agent of globalization. Higher education is not only passively responding to globalization but has become an active player in the global arena” (p. 3).

Understanding the rationales for the internationalization of higher education is also important. De Wit (2002, pp. 83-102) identifies four categories of rationales for internationalization: (a) political (includes the subcategories of foreign policy, national security, technical assistance, peace and mutual understanding, and national and regional identity); (b) economic (includes the subcategories of growth and competitiveness, national educational demands, the labor market, and financial incentives for institutions and governments); (c) cultural/social; and (d) academic (with the subcategories of providing an international dimension to research and teaching, extension of the academic horizon, institution-building, profile and status, enhancement of quality, and international academic standards). De Wit also states that the rationales for internationalization are to a large extent constructed by several stakeholders such as governments, the private sector, institutions, and faculty and students. In spite of the fact that each of these stakeholder groups has a set of priorities, there is also an important overlap.

Apart from the theoretical perspectives in the internationalization of higher education discussed above, it is also important to understand what internationalization really means in practice for the faculty and students of an institution higher education. According to Stone (2006, pp. 410-411), through an internationalized learning experience, all staff and students are encouraged and supported to:

- increase their capacity to successfully interact with people from other cultures;
- improve their knowledge and understanding of cultural difference, particularly the role of their own cultural influences and assumptions;
- identify important conceptual dimensions of cultural difference;
- understand the potential importance of cultural difference in human relationships;
- develop strategies for accommodating cultural difference to achieve mutually agreeable outcomes;
- develop global perspectives (“see the bigger picture”) and become “world citizens” by developing insights into global trends, issues, and responsibilities;
- understand the profound impact of new technologies, international dynamics, and globalization on economic, political, social, environmental, and educational systems;



- develop better understandings and insights into a range of specific cultures including those within Australia, especially in terms of implicit or less conscious values, attitudes, and beliefs;
- develop the attributes of responsiveness and adaptability to more effectively engage in intercultural situations;
- approach situations involving people from other cultures with greater levels of comfort, satisfaction, confidence, and sensitivity;
- achieve a workable balance between the challenges of task completion and the development of positive human relationships in intercultural situations;
- recognize address problems arising from cultural difference, including possible referral to appropriate support services; and
- understand and maintain commitment to the university's code of ethics relating to international students.

To sum up, as all the aforementioned arguments indicate, internationalization of higher education is one of the key concepts for today's institutions of higher education, and international students are at the very center of this concept. Therefore, advancing higher education's internationalization in a way depends on better understanding and developing international students' learning experience. As adapting to the new academic and social environment is one of the most vital aspects of international students' learning experience, it is important and necessary to study international student adaptation.

2. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

2.1. Contribution of International Students to American Higher Education

Emphasizing the positive contribution of international students to American higher education, Sjogren (1998, p.193) states that "international students, when properly recruited and professionally serviced by competent and caring college staffs, will add a desirable dimension to a campus environment. While the financial reward to the institution can be considerable, the mere presence of well-qualified and properly placed students from throughout the world is far more significant and visible benefit for the college or university." Supporting Sjogren, Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004, p. 167) point out that "universities and colleges can benefit greatly if they become international communities that contribute to the advancement of knowledge. The outcomes of hosting international students are beneficial for all parties involved as these students contribute to the enrichment of higher education, to the strengthening of relations with various countries in world trade, and to the promotion of global understanding."

Academically, international students enrich the learning environment and experiences of American students and enhance academic excellence in American campuses (Rai, 2002, Hayward & Siaya, 2001; Tornkovick, Al-Katib, & Jones, 1996). International students also have the potential of bringing an international perspective to class discussions, and challenging and encouraging instructors to consider new methods of teaching (Dunn, 2006). Economically, international students bring billions of dollars to the U.S. economy each year, making the U.S. higher education one of the top five largest service sector exports. Culturally, international students promote international and cross-cultural understanding (Rai, 2002, Leong & Chou, 1996; Hess, 1994, Paige, 1990). Jardine (1990) states that international students not only contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the host community while they are in



the United States, they also contribute to the knowledge and understanding about the host country when they return home. Politically, experiencing freedom and opportunity in the United States, international students understand American ideology and values better than their co-nationals. Some international students studying in American universities become political leaders in their countries when they go back. Giving future foreign leaders firsthand exposure to American system of government presumably builds a safer, freer, and more prosperous world (Dunn, 2006). Pfaffenroth (1997) emphasizes the importance of international students in the political agenda by stating that “if Americans wish to maintain a global presence and global influence, it is time our institutions of higher education think seriously and systematically about what they want to do with their international students” (p. 7).

2.2. Motivations of International Students for Studying in the United States

According to Hendricks and Skinner (1977), students have been coming to the United States since 1784, and there is a tremendous increase in the number since the end of World War II. The most important reasons for this increase are the emergence of the United States as a leading industrial nation in the world and the use of English as an international language. Marion (1986) lists some other reasons as the quality of higher education, the availability of jobs, the availability of funds, and the unstable political and economic conditions in many countries.

Kung (2007) lists the benefits and advantages of studying in a foreign country as the opportunity for students:

- to broaden their knowledge and acquire new skills in order to support their families in the future and to contribute to the development of their homeland,
- to learn more about themselves,
- to promote personal change and growth,
- to learn the host country's language and culture,
- to comprehend their own cultural values and biases and extend their worldview,
- to become more comfortable socializing with culturally different people,
- to interact and network with Americans, local communities, and other international students,
- to have better employment opportunities,
- to advance their professions,
- to shape their outlooks, professional lives and orientations, and
- to obtain intercultural competencies.

Fry (1984) and Altbach, Kelly, and Lulat (1985) point out that the acquisition of technical skills, and improvement of professional opportunities at home are among the major motivations for study abroad by international students from developing countries. This approach is generally supported by the governments of developing countries as well. Most of the developing countries provide scholarships for students to study in the United States on the condition of returning back upon completion of their studies. Many developing countries have recognized the importance of improving their workforce and they want to improve the standard of living of their people (Cheng, 1999).

Altbach, Kelly, and Lulat (1985) listed several push and pull factors related to motivations of international students for studying abroad. The push factors are variables stemming from the home country and include:



- the availability of scholarships to study abroad
- poor quality or lack of educational facilities
- lack of research facilities
- failure to gain admission into local institutions
- enhanced value (in the market place) of a foreign degree
- discrimination against minorities
- politically uncongenial situation

The pull factors are key variables related to the host-country and include:

- availability of scholarships to international students
- good quality education
- availability of advanced research facilities
- availability of appropriate educational facilities
- presence of relatives willing to provide financial assistance
- congenial political situation
- congenial socio-economic and political environment to migrate to
- opportunity for general international life experience

Although international students come to the United States from industrialized nations as well, they generally have different motivations such as linguistic training, cultural enrichment, and experience of living in another country (Cheng, 1999; Altbach, Kelly, & Lulat, 1985).

3. ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Living and studying in a new social and academic environment generally come with new types of difficulties. Most common problems related to international students' adjustment process reported in the related literature are language problems, cultural adjustment problems, accommodation difficulties, discrimination, dietary restrictions, loneliness, homesickness, geographic distance from family and friends, understanding and adjusting to new social norms, adapting to new study and test taking techniques, and problems related to classroom instruction (Dunn, 2006; White, Brown, & Suddick, 1983; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1982). Another major problem reported in the studies is academic stress due to language and new academic culture and system (Dolan, 1997), as well as differences in instruction modes, advising styles, research methods, instructors' expectations of students (Tanno, Hamazaki, Mogi-Hein, & Takahashi, 1995) and academic support mechanisms (Kinoshita & Bowman, 1998). Other documented problems include financial difficulties (Lin & Yi, 1997), difficulties in interpersonal relationship (Sheeham & Pearson, 1995), problems with friendship patterns (Trice & Elliott, 1993), finding and adjusting to social support systems (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004), and differences in eating habits, customs, and values (Leong & Chou, 1996).

3.1. English Language and Adjustment Problems

Scholars often count problems related to English language among the most common adaptation issues experienced by international students. Although most international students have to pass a formal language test such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) in order to get admitted to a



program in an American college or university, language proficiency and language-based problems have been found by many researchers among the major factors affecting international students' adjustment to their new social and academic environment (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Mori, 2000; Senyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000; Lin & Yi, 1997; Stoyhoff, 1997; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992; Dunnett, 1985; Surdam & Collins, 1984).

Zhao (1993) states that "poor language proficiency impedes social interactions of foreign students with host students, professors, and other members of the academic community as well as the society at large, which may then lead to possible social and psychological problems and negatively contribute to academic achievement" (p. 11). International students encounter unique difficulties not experienced by English speaking students. Some of these unique challenges include extra time required to read assigned readings, difficulties in understanding class lectures and discussions, and difficulties in communicating concerns and viewpoints. The language barrier between international students and English speaking students create obstacles to build of interpersonal relationships (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007). Barratt and Huba (1994) found that better English skills lead to better interpersonal relationships with American students and that as the students' English proficiency increases, so does their self-esteem. Sawir (2005) points out that "of all the social and academic issues and problems facing international students that are cited in recent studies – differences in learning style, culture shock, homesickness, social difficulties – the problem they themselves most often refer to is difficulties with English" (p. 569).

Galloway and Jenkins (2005) conducted a study with 215 international students in order to determine the extent of their adjustment problems in the United States. Results of the study indicated that problems with the English language were the largest single determinant of problems. Similarly, Dao, Lee, and Chang (2007) reported that the results of a study conducted on 112 international students indicated that those individuals who were at risk of depressive feelings were more likely to have low perceived English fluency.

Surdam and Collins (1984), in a study of a group of 143 international students from 35 countries who enrolled in a major public university in the United States, investigated the students' intercultural contact with hosts and peers, and their adjustment to social life in the U.S. With regard to English language proficiency, a major finding of the study indicated that "students who believed their English was adequate were significantly better adapted (fewer problems on a checklist) than those who believed it to be inadequate" (p. 243). Lee, Abd-ella, and Burks (1981) reported that foreign students who had a greater command of English skills, as measured by TOEFL scores and student self-evaluation of language ability, appeared to adjust more successfully to U.S. academic environment on a number of factors such as understanding the grading system and course requirements, having opportunities to discuss course work with faculty members, getting advice from academic advisors, and being respected as a fellow human being by U.S. students. In general, higher TOEFL scores and higher self-ratings both correlated with better adjustment; however, TOEFL scores were not as strongly related to as many adjustment factors as self-evaluations of language ability in this study.

Research based on specific language skills revealed important results as well. Investigating the role of listening skills in international students' academic adjustment, Constantinides (1992) found that during a lecture if international students encounter an unknown key word or phrase, they tend to stop following the lecture at that point and focus on figuring out the meaning of that particular word or phrase, missing other crucial parts of the ongoing lecture. Corroborating Constantinides, Dolan (1997) found that



the low language proficiency levels of international students partially caused lack of participation in the classroom. Limited listening skills blocked their understanding of classroom discussion, and weak speaking abilities hindered their contribution in discussion. As for the speaking skills, Yeh and Inose (2003) reported that international students who are not fluent at spoken English encounter significantly higher levels of acculturative difficulties than those who are more proficient at spoken English. Hayes and Lin (1994) supported Yeh and Inose's findings stating that those who reported sufficient English fluency when they arrived in the United States showed better adjustment than those who did not.

Focusing on the challenges of international students related to writing skills, Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) conducted a case study to examine students' academic writing difficulties. The results of the study revealed that since international students bring with them different writing styles, they generally need assistance in adjusting to the writing culture and requirements of the new academic environment, and instructors should be more willing to offer the needed help to ease these students' adjustment process to the new culture of written language. Prior (1995) and Spack (1997) examined writings by international students at different levels, and they both found that writing remained problematic even for students who were otherwise successful in their professional studies. In a study with similar purposes, Casanave (1995) investigated the writing experiences of 12 international students. Results of the study indicated that the fundamental issue was not that students could not write but rather that they thought and organized their writings in ways different from the dominant discourse of American academia. Supporting Casanave's findings, in a study with 42 international students taking ESL writing courses at University of Iowa, Serverino (2004) found that although students have good knowledge of grammar and sentence structure (due to the emphasis on these aspects of language in their home country EFL settings), they generally need help with rhetoric (purpose, audience, thesis, and support).

One important point that is worth adding into the discussion of language proficiency of international students is the effectiveness of TOEFL scores. Although TOEFL is the most widely used measure of language proficiency of international students in the United States, some scholars state that TOEFL scores may not always effectively reflect language use of students in real life academic and social situations. Coleman (1997) pointed out the discrepancies between international students' measured language proficiency (i.e. TOEFL or TSE cores) and their actual language performance in real life situations. According to Coleman, even students who scored high on these tests may not be able to accomplish social academic tasks they encounter without worrying about their language abilities. Along with Graham (1987) and Huang (1997), Coleman also states that international students' perceived language skills may have a significant influence on their accomplishment of classroom tasks. In another study questioning the effectiveness of TOEFL scores, Xu (1991) surveyed 450 international graduate students from three large universities in upstate New York. Results of the study revealed that students' self-ratings of English proficiency were the most significant predictors of their perceived level of academic difficulty. Xu stated that "TOEFL scores, the most commonly used measure of English proficiency and readiness for international students to begin their academic programs in U.S. higher education institutions, were not found to be significantly associated with the level of academic difficulty" (p. 567). Stoyhoff (1997) stated that international students' use of strategies to learn new knowledge (and to organize, implement, monitor, and adjust their learning behavior) can be as crucial as their TOEFL scores in terms of predicting students' success in American colleges and universities. The discussion of the effectiveness of TOEFL scores in terms of predicting actual language performance of students brings us to the point of considering other measures along with TOEFL scores while using language proficiency



as a factor in international student adjustment. Perceived language proficiency of international students might work as one of those measures. Coleman (1997), Huang (1997), and Graham (1987) stated that international students' perceived language skills have the most significant influence on their estimation of the stressfulness of classroom situations. Barratt and Huba (1994) documented that using a self-reported fluency scale as a method of measuring and assessing English language fluency can be effective.

It is also worth mentioning that although many studies indicated that poor language proficiency negatively affects academic success and adjustment, there are some research findings indicating little relationship between them. For example, Light, Xu, and Mossop (1987) analyzed records of 376 international graduate students at a New York university for relationships among TOEFL score, GPA, course load, and academic major. Their findings indicated that a TOEFL score was not an effective predictor of academic success, as measured by GPA, for this group of international students. However, there was a significant correlation between TOEFL score and graduate credits earned. In a similar study, Wicks (1996) examined the effects of English proficiency on the academic achievement of 295 international students studying at an Australian university. Results revealed that English proficiency did not have any significant effect on academic performance. It is important to note that both studies mentioned above examined the effects of English proficiency only on academic achievement. However, international students' adjustment to their new environment requires more than academic achievement. That is, although there are some examples that English proficiency might not be very effective on academic performance, sufficient language skills are still very important for overall adjustment which involves not only academic but also social and cultural adaptation.

Cultures differ greatly from each other in how much they rely on verbal messages to convey meaning. Distinguishing among high-context and low-context communication, Hall (1976) states that linguistic codes (words, phrases, and sentences) and contexts (background, preprogrammed responses of the recipient, and situations) are used together to convey meaning. In the high-context communication most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person while in the low-context, communication of information relies more on explicit linguistic codes. Some cultures employ high-context communication style while others employ the low context one. American culture belongs to low-context culture. International students coming from a high-context culture may sometimes feel that they are not understood in the low-context culture of the United States because they are not used to saying everything explicitly.

As part of the process of adjusting to their new environment successfully, international students in American institutions of higher education should master both conversational and formal forms of English. Conversational English is necessary for everyday and social life while formal English is crucial for academic success. Furthermore, mastering a language consists of much more than learning the vocabulary and grammar of that language. The learner also has to know the cultural rules that govern oral and verbal communication. Therefore, international students generally need more than what they were taught throughout their language learning process. Cultural rules in spoken language such as knowing the acceptable amount of talk, the volume of the voice, turn-taking process, or pauses between speakers; or conventions in written language such as punctuation, format of a formal paper, or written devices of coherence must be learned in order to become active and successful users of language in the new culture (Mazza Duerto, 2004).



In one of the few attempts to investigate the performance of both the international students and their professors in the process of adjustment to new academic environment, Helkinhelmo and Shute (1986) conducted a qualitative study of international students and their learning barriers in a Canadian university. Results of the study indicated that no matter how proficient international students are in English, it was still hard for them to fully comprehend the idioms, acronyms, and referrals related to cultural and historical events. Huang's (1997) study supported the results of Helkinhelmo and Shute's study.

Yao (1983) and Walfish (2001) found in their studies with Chinese international students that even common words like 'capitalism' and 'evolution' might carry quite different meanings for students coming from different cultural backgrounds. In another study with Chinese students, Chang (1996) found that even some common expressions like 'How are you?' or 'I will call you later' might cause confusion due to Chinese students' tendency of understanding these expressions in their literal meanings. Focusing on the use of metaphors in the American college classroom, Littlemore (2001) found in a survey study that metaphors are frequently used in the classrooms, and international students' interpretations of those metaphors might significantly differ from professors' intentions.

Focusing on the reasons of language-based challenges faced by international students, Sawir (2005) suggested that most of the difficulties are grounded in students' prior learning experiences (which emphasized grammar and structure, not conversational skills). Sawir states that most studies that describe the English language problems of international students focus on the symptoms rather than the underlying causes. In other words, studies largely focus on language constraints as they have been experienced by international students once embarking on their studies in a new social/academic environment. Sawir points out that one way of better understanding the situation is to examine the influence of students' prior learning experiences and their beliefs about learning. Sawir states that "unless researchers focus on the whole learning biography of the international students, they will not fully understand the difficulties faced by both these international students and their teacher. Further, by focusing merely on the language difficulties occurring after the student arrives in the English speaking country, it is implied that the solution of those difficulties lies solely with the students concerned plus the institutions in which those students are studying. But their previous institutions of study in the students' countries of origin, and in many cases the government responsible for these institutions, also have responsibilities" (p. 570).

Overall, problems based on English language abilities are among the most commonly experienced difficulties of international students, and they are also among the most frequently investigated adjustment related factors by researchers.

3.2. Adjusting to a New Academic Culture

Another big challenge that international students face in adapting to their new environment is adjusting to a different educational system than they are used to. Education systems differ across cultures. Most international students come from education systems that differ in practice, content, and context from the system in the United States. Each international student brings culturally based rules and expectations about education and classroom behavior. Instructors and American peers of international students also bring their own rules, assumptions, and expectations to the classroom (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Eland, 2001; Dunphy, 1999; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Liberman, 1994; Andersen & Powell, 1991; Day & Hajj, 1986; White, Brown, & Suddick, 1983).



Dolan (1997) notes that “international students must not only adjust to culture, but also adjust to unfamiliar academic styles as well” (p. ii). Studying in a new academic culture involves adjustment to new methods of teachings, different behaviors of instructors, different expectations of students by instructors, and different methods of research. Philosophy, practice, and objectives of any education system are rooted in its cultural foundations, traditions, and social demands. The expected behaviors and educational outcomes of a particular education system usually correlate with its educational philosophy and cultural traditions (Bennett, 1999; Fox, 1994).

The idea of freely selecting courses, making an individual course schedule, and selecting professors might be new to many international students. Many American professors might be expecting their students to take the initiative about their learning and design their own study plans while many international students expect their professors to become more directive and helpful. A lot of misunderstanding may arise from mismatch of assumptions and expectations on both sides. International students may interpret the lack of guidance from the professors as neglect, coldness, and lack of attention while professors may think of students’ over reliance as lack of independent study habits (Wang, 2004). Moreover, international students, unfamiliar with American academic culture, may not know how to establish comfortable relationship with faculty members and how to take initiatives in seeking help from them (Wang, 2003). Noting that the academic adjustment of international students is largely related to the academic culture of home countries, Konyu-Fogel (1993) states that “the greater the differences among the educational system of the subject’s home country relative to the U.S., the more academic adjustment difficulties are experienced by international students” (p. 206).

The status of the teacher in the classroom varies across different educational systems. Robinson (1992) states that the status difference among students and professors in the United States may not be apparent, but it may be expressed in subtle ways such as tone of voices or choices of words. In the cultures of some international students, teachers might expect ultimate obedience from their students because of their positions, while students in most American classrooms are expected and encouraged to challenge their teachers (Yee, 1995). Also, many international students may expect that information and answers to questions come from the professors correctly and naturally, and the focus of students’ efforts is on understanding information from their teachers’ lectures. This situation may cause confusion and frustration among American professors who are used to getting critical questions from their students and who are looking for the ways of encouraging classroom discussion. The students’ silent responses and passive involvement might be interpreted by many American professors as failure to meet the participation requirements for a course (Wang, 2004).

Many scholars suggest that classroom atmosphere, especially the quality and degree of faculty-student interactions in American universities, could cause confusion and anxiety among international students because most international students are accustomed to listening rather than speaking in class (Edwards & Tonkin, 1990; Craig, 1981). Badur (2003) states that :

“having a command of English helps international students to be successful in college. But English proficiency by itself may be insufficient if they lack the ability to meet academic expectations governing written and oral expression. Students need to process what they learn, raise questions, and critique materials learned in class. This is a major adjustment for international students, who may be accustomed to one-way communication where the professor lectures and students take notes without asking questions. The



hesitancy of international students to express themselves verbally or in writing stems in part from their unfamiliarity with the norms of American classrooms. Classroom settings in the United States are often very dynamic, and students are required to participate by stating their opinions or debating with fellow students. International students may have difficulty adapting to an active environment in which individuals take responsibility in the learning process and are graded on their performance” (p. 39).

Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) noted that students from individualistic cultures tend to actively participate in the classroom activities such as asking and answering questions and engaging in class discussions whereas students from collectivist cultures are less likely to actively participate in debates. International students from collectivist cultures may not be trained to actively participate in classroom class discussions under the idea of avoiding open confrontation. Lack of participation, on the other hand, adversely influences their scores (Wang, 2003).

As Mazza Duerto (2004) noted, the American system of education is different from other educational systems in the world as it encourages and emphasizes the discovery of knowledge. International students generally find that American professors’ expectations, teaching strategies, reading assignments, and examinations differed from those of teachers in their home countries who emphasized the lecture approach to education and the memorization of large bodies of information.

McCargar's (1993) research with international students shows that some students most strongly oppose the idea of disagreeing with the teacher, and there are significant differences between the expectations of international students and those of their American teachers in classroom participation and student teacher relationships. The international students want more error correction, believe that they should agree with the teacher, and more strongly favor acceptance of authority; the teachers, on the other hand, believe that students should have an internal locus of academic control and take responsibility for their own learning. Liberman's (1994) research yields similar results.

In their study of academic needs of international students, Leong and Sedlacek (1989) surveyed 214 students, results indicated that international students have greater academic needs overall than American students. The top five areas of needs indicated by international students were the needs to develop more effective study skills, receive help in selecting courses, improve writing skills, become more comfortable speaking up in class, and obtain more help from an academic adviser.

Liberman (1994) conducted a large scale study of Asian students' perceptions of their American education experience. Most of the themes emerged from the study were related to cultural differences in academic systems. Many participants reported that classroom interaction was not encouraged or even allowed in their countries but was required in the American classrooms. Although they highly valued the active, open classroom discussions in the United States, they expressed discomfort with having to participate in class. Participants were also highly critical of American students for their lack of respect for professors, arguing about grades, and contributing to class discussions even when they do not have anything important to say. Although participants appreciated the focus on critical analysis in the American education system, some reported having difficulties coping with the required intellectual skills. Besides, the participants of the study reported that they find more emphasis on independent, creative, and critical thinking and analysis in American classrooms when compared to classroom settings in their home countries.



Tompson and Tompson (1996) examined international student behaviors that hinder academic success in a study focused on the views of faculty members. A number of business school faculty at two universities completed an e-mail survey on international student behaviors that undermine performance. Faculty participants were also asked to identify strategies that they had used successfully in their classes to improve the academic experience for their international students. In addition, international students majoring in business were asked questions about their adjustment experiences and coping strategies. Once the main concerns of faculty were identified, a group of international students were asked to discuss their concerns and motivations for behaving as identified by faculty. They were also asked to describe any faculty actions that contributed to their academic experience or success. Faculty participants identified five negative behaviors of international students: insufficient class participation, not asking for clarification on assignments, sitting and studying only with other international students, and breach of ethical academic standards. International students indicated that social isolation, language skills, and lack of familiarity with norms, rules, and regulations were their greatest concerns. There were four strategies used by faculty that were most commonly mentioned by both faculty and student as being helpful to students: (1) initiating an individual meeting between student and instructor in which expectations and questions can be discussed, (2) using small groups in class to help students get to know each other and speak up more easily, (3) modifying lecture style and format, including use of visual aids and omitting slang, and (4) creating a non-threatening learning environment by discussing cultural differences and stereotypes in class. In a similar study, examining faculty perceptions of international students' adjustment to the American academic system, Emmanuel (1992) reported that most faculty members advising international graduate students agree with the idea of giving special consideration to the students' unique situation and background although there were diverging perspectives about how to achieve the purpose of helping international students through the academic adjustment process. A considerable proportion of the faculty noted that international students should be treated in the same way as American students, and that they should not be given extra academic help while other professors disagreed with this viewpoint stating that international students might need extra mentoring for academic and social adaptation purposes.

Kao and Gansneder (1995) examined international graduate Asian students' speaking frequency in the American classrooms and reasons that prevent them from participating in class discussions. 330 students from 45 different countries enrolled in a southeastern state university participated in the study. The study addressed three basic questions: (a) how often do international students participate in class discussions, (b) what reasons are given by international students for not speaking up in class, and (c) how do factors from not speaking in class differ from different groups of international students. The results of the study indicated that cultural factors make Asian students more reticent in class. The classroom atmosphere, class size, familiarity of the topic in discussion, and requirement to speak in class as part of a grade were reported as a complex part of multidimensional behavior. The researchers noted that international students who were taught not to question teachers or express their views in class definitely needed help adjusting to the American educational system.

Consequently, reviewed literature suggests that the differences between the academic cultures of the United States and international students' home countries have an important impact on the adaptation difficulties experienced by international students.



3.3. Other Factors Affecting the Adjustment of International Students

Apart from the factors mentioned so far, some demographic variables such as age and gender have been frequently examined in terms of their effects on international student adjustment. Age seems to be one of the most common independent variables in studies investigating adjustment issues of international students. However, different studies report different results related to the effect of age on adjustment. Adelegan and Parks (1985) found in their study that older African students have greater difficulty adapting in their new environment in the United States than did younger students. Similarly, Cheng (1999) reported that older international students had significantly more difficulties, especially in the area of English language related problems. On the other hand, Ninggal (1998) reported that younger Malaysian students experienced more stress than older ones especially in the areas of perceived discrimination, homesickness, perceived hate, perceived fear, and cultural shock. Similarly, Shabeeb (1996) noted that younger Saudi and Arabian Gulf students reported more problems in admission, living/dining, and placement services. Razavi's (1988) study revealed that there are differences between the problems of older and younger international students. Younger students tend to experience more problems in living/dining issues and financial aid while older students seem to be having more problems in social/personal issues and student activities. Lesser (1998), on the other hand, reported age as a non-significant predictor of international student adjustment. Overall, it can be said that there is not a consistency among the results of the studies that examined age as a factor affecting international students' adjustment to their new environment. Wang (2003) states that "one major reason for disagreement in the research on the effects of age on adjustment is that research on age and adjustment use arbitrary age division lines (e.g. 24, 26, 30) to distinguish among older and younger students. It is difficult to establish a clear-cut age dividing line because people's maturity and personal experiences do not correspond precisely with age and because students at certain age clusters tend to share similar characteristics (e.g. undergraduate students)" (p. 31).

Gender is another demographic variable of which effects on adjustment have been investigated by many researchers. Many studies revealed that male and female students experience different kinds of problems. In general, female students encounter more emotional, psychological, or self-perception related difficulties, while male students seem to be experiencing more difficulties in English (Wang, 2003). However, results of the studies examining gender as a variable in international students' adjustment revealed more consistent results as compared to the results related to age. Most of the studies concur that female international students experience more adjustment problems than males (Davenport & Yurich, 1991; Lee, Abd-ella, & Burks, 1981). For example, in Aydin's (1997) study international female students reported marginally higher levels of anxiety and depression than male students; furthermore, men, in Aydin's study, had higher scores on personal control and initiative. Similarly, Manese, Sedlacek, & Leong (1988) reported that in terms of self perceptions, international female students expected to have a harder time than males adjusting to the university. Although most of the studies found that females are likely to experience more problems than men, there are still some studies which revealed opposite results. Cheng (1999) reported that male students experienced significantly more problems than female students in the problem areas of admission/selection, orientation, social/personal, English language, student activity, financial aid, and placement service. Fidora's (1989) study, on the other hand, revealed no significant differences between male and female international students in academic achievement, educational satisfaction, and overall acculturation related variables. Overall, it can be concluded that although most studies report females as having more adjustment problems than males, different populations may yield different results.



Length of stay in the United States appears to be another factor that affects the level of adjustment problems experienced by international students. Although international students with different lengths of stay may experience different kinds of problems, research suggests that, in general, students who stayed for a shorter period of time experienced more adjustment problems (Wang, 2003). For example, Cheng's (1999) study revealed that international students who stayed in the United States less than 6 months experienced significantly more problems in social/personal and living/dining problem areas than those who stayed longer. Similarly, Xia (1991) found that students who stayed in the United States six months or less experienced significantly more problems with the English language than those who stayed more than three years. Also, students who stayed one year or less experienced significantly more difficulties than those who stayed more than three years. Shahmirzadi (1989), on the other hand, found that, based on the number of years they have stayed in the United States, there are no significant differences in the numbers of problems reported by the international students on the Michigan International Student Problem Inventory. Wang (2003) notes that "research shows that there is often a relationship among length of stay and adjustment—the longer the stay, the fewer the problems. However, there is no strict correspondence among the different lengths of stay and adjustment. Instead, the tendency is that adjustment is quicker in the initial stages, and then adjustment momentum reduces over time and eventually stabilizes. Hence, it is crucial to offer help to international students at pre-departure and early arrival stages" (p. 33).

Orientation, both pre-departure and in the United States, is another important factor affecting adjustment process of international students. Pre-departure orientation about the experience of studying in the United States seem to be helping adjustment significantly because international students generally tailor their expectations, and identify their needs and interests depending on the knowledge they get in pre-departure orientation. In other words, pre-departure orientation helps to form expectations which are closer to the reality at the American campuses, and lead to good adjustment (Aydin, 1997; Sami, 1986). Research also agrees on the effectiveness of orientation services provided to students after they arrive in the United States (Wang, 2003).

Other variables such as marital status, country of origin, academic level (graduate vs. undergraduate), major (science and engineering vs. arts and humanities), source of financial support (family supported vs. assistantship or scholarship), and college or university size have also been examined by many researchers investigating international student adjustment. However, results of the studies on these variables greatly differ based on the student population examined.

4. CONCLUSION

First of all, theoretical and research literature on international students' adjustment issues suggest that there are many variables which may affect the level and type of adjustment problems experienced by international students. That is, there is not a fixed model or explanation of adjustment issues of international students as various factors such as country of origin, language proficiency, gender, etc. may change the actual experience of adaptation issues. As the reviewed studies suggest, we cannot simply look at the adjustment issues experienced by other international students and acknowledge that all those issues will be true for this new group of students.



Literature on international students' adjustment issues points out that English language abilities may be one of the most important factors which affect the adaptation process. However, research also suggests that examining the effects of English on international student adjustment should not be as simple as calculating the correlation coefficients between the students' TOEFL scores and the level of reported adjustment problems. According to related literature, the first reason for this is that the TOEFL score alone may not be reflecting the actual performance of a student in real life academic and social situations. Secondly, research notes that a student's perceived language proficiency may be as important as his/her actual TOEFL score in terms of language-related problems. Third, students might be having problems with specific language skills such as writing or speaking. These specific problems might have significant affects on their overall adjustment to their new social and academic environment. Therefore, investigation of the relationship between English language and adjustment problems should look at specific language skills. Fourth, students do not use English for academic purposes only. With all the social and cultural aspects of it, student life in a foreign country involves more than understanding a textbook or asking a question to a professor. Students need to use English for other daily purposes such as socializing, shopping, banking, etc. Problems experienced on these dimensions of language use may affect students' overall adjustment. Therefore, problems related to the social use of English language should also be incorporated into the investigation of the relationship between language and adjustment. Consequently, related research suggests that examining the relationship between language and adjustment should go beyond correlating TOEFL scores and the level of experienced problems.

Another important issue noted in the literature related to international students' adjustment problems is that the differences between the academic culture in the United States and academic culture of a student's home country might seriously affect that student's adjustment process.

Length of stay is noted in the related literature as another important factor which affects the level of adjustment problems experienced by international students. Researchers found in their studies that generally the longer the students stay in the United States, the lower the level of adjustment problems will be. U-curve hypothesis suggests a high initial feeling of adjustment followed by a low and then ending in a high as the sojourner adapts to the new environment. In other words, the uninterrupted amount of time spent in the host country has a positive effect on the student adjustment.

Apart from the variables mentioned above, scholars also examined the effects of some demographic factors such as gender and major on the experienced adjustment problems of international students. There seems to be a lack of pattern in the relationship between these demographic variables and adjustment issues. Studies with different student populations revealed different results.

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