Second Language Competence and Student Acculturation: The Case of International Students

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Abstract

This paper presents a thorough literature review of the effects of second language competence on student acculturation and adjustment in an international setting. The study stems from a view of globalization as a key factor in today's higher education considering, for instance, the rapid increase of overseas students over the years. A fundamental aspect of studying in a new country is the stipulation of interacting in a different language. With the spread of English as a lingua franca, a large part of the programs taught overseas is undertaken in English. Shedding light on this, the current paper provides a review of recent research efforts aimed at exploring the effects of second language competence on international students' acculturation and academic success. A series of terms and concepts will first be defined, before the findings of various studies are discussed. The paper will then conclude with the author's reflection.

Keywords: Acculturation, adjustment, academic success, second language competence, sociocultural knowledge.

Introduction

Notwithstanding the academic content, be it curricular or extra-curricular, of a certain study program, the notion of banking on a second or a foreign language to interact with peers, teachers and other individuals in a given community has been reported to have varied effects on student acculturation and academic success in an international study (Ward, 2004). According to Masgoret (2006:312), "the development of language fluency and other communication competencies and the development of interpersonal relationships with members of the receiving community appear to function dynamically in the ongoing process of culture learning". The current paper focuses on the linkage between student language competence and their acculturation. Having said that, there are however other factors which may well have an effect on an international student's experience ranging from academic factors to personal ones. Albeit their importance and relation to second language competence, these foci are beyond the scope of this paper.

Relevant Terms and Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, the following terms and definitions are utilized. First, and opposed to a 'home student', an international student is a student who is enrolled in an academic or language study in a country other than their own for an extended period of time. Further technical details concerning the nature of study, host and origin communities will be discussed in the next section. It is also worth defining the term 'language competence' which researchers, such as Coleman (1995, cited in Regan et al., 2009:21) as "not a single entity but a multidimensional construct" covering areas such as sentence structure, lexicon, and diction, which Regan et al. (ibid) describe as the "standard categories" of language competence. Universities in Western contexts, i.e. where the majority of international students tend to enroll, resort to certain measures as proofs of students' language competence before such students embark on their academic study. For instance, standardized tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and other matching tests, e.g. DALF and DELF for French. As a further measure for international students' language competence, such students are also required to undertake placement tests and rate their own language ability in the forms, surveys or interviews they go through. Added to the above, it is worth including in this section terms such as adjustment and academic achievement which Andrade (2006:134) amply defines as "adjustment describes the fit between students and the academic environment (Ramsay et al., 1999), and may examine issues such as learning styles, study habits, educational background, culture and language proficiency. Academic achievement refers to evidence of learning, which may be measured by successful completion of course requirements, grade point average (GPA), satisfactory academic standing or retention". By and large, international students' adjustment refers to how they adapt daily life practices and challenges into their new environment. On the other hand, academic achievement (which can be measured more straightforwardly) is focused on evaluating student performance and thus it encompasses tests, of various forms, and certain formulas which students compulsorily undertake, and the outcome of which are what decides student success or failure. Added to this, students' perceived recital and objectives are other factors that also shape both student adjustment and academic achievement. A further notion to remark is that of 'acculturation', which Duru and Poyrazli (2007:100) define as "a process of cultural change that results from repeated direct contact between two distinct cultural groups". Elaborating on this, Spenader (2011) adds that "the social and psychological integration of the

learner with the target language group" (p. 382). Clément (1986:285), amongst other researchers, claim that "language proficiency has a direct impact on acculturation". Undoubtedly, therefore, the current study takes into account the effects (if any) of acculturation on language competence, and vice versa. A good reader of literature on studentship and language development could easily figure out the various ways in which a particular cross-cultural exchange is conjectured, e.g. immersion, integration, assimilation and acculturation (c.f. Berry 1990, cited in Spenader 2011: 387). This paper focuses on the latter given its evident prominence in the relevant literature, particularly that which deals with international students and their language competence.

ESL/EFL Settings

Amongst other English-speaking countries, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are ranked to be the top destinations for international students accumulating a percentage of 38% of the overall international student population (UNESCO, 2012). Such figures, together with the marketization of Western degree programs to non-English settings, do make English a major second/foreign language (ESL/EFL respectively) for most enrolling students. Andrade (2006: 139) remarks that:

> International students at various institutions have identified English-related skills, such as listening ability, lecture and reading comprehension, note taking, oral communication, vocabulary and writing, as being problematic (Lee, 1997; Lewthwaite, 1996; Senyshyn et al., 2000). Studies have found that students lack confidence in their English abilities (Lewthwaite, 1996; Robertson et al., 2000; Senyshyn et al., 2000; Tompson and Tompson, 1996) and fear making mistakes (Jacob and Greggo, 2001), which may inhibit their class participation. (Lewthwaite, 1996; Robertson et al., 2000; Tompson and Tompson, 1996)".

Studies such as that of Holmes (2004) and Mendelsohn (2002) reported an increasing strive amongst international students with general pedagogical activities, e.g. note-taking, due to their relatively-low English language levels. Accordingly, it is without a doubt that English language may well represent a major challenge for international students, particularly in academic programs which they study with their native peers. The linkage between English language competence and academic achievement was further explored in a study by Vinke and Jochems (1993) who investigated the academic performance of a group of international postgraduate Indonesian students in the Netherlands. The authors concluded that "age and English proficiency affected the ability to earn grades and to succeed in a postgraduate English-medium program" (p. 281); yet, they observed that:

> If students have a thorough command of English, language proficiency will hardly be an impediment to academic achievement. In this case the relationship between English proficiency and academic success will be weak and further improvement…will hardly affect academic success. The lower a student's level of English proficiency, the more it will stand in the way of academic success. (p. 281)

In another study, Woodrow (2006) has investigated the validity of the IELTS examination bands and descriptors in predicting students' academic success. She found that "the strongest relationships were between speaking [and] listening and GPA and, surprisingly, the

relationship between reading and GPA was not significant" (Woodrow, ibid:58). Nonetheless, she concluded that "the correlations [overall] were not large, indicating English proficiency only accounts for a portion of academic success" (ibid:58). In line with Vinke and Jochems (1993), Woodrow (ibid:61) noted that "when proficiency is at the lower end of the entry requirement, it influences academic performance, whereas for those students who enter with scores in excess of the minimum requirement, no influence is detected". Such findings are in agreement with those found by Berman and Cheng (2001), Dooey and Oliver (2002), Feast (2002), and Kerstjens and Nery (2000). Interestingly, however, Andrade (2006:148) adds that "the achievement of international undergraduates may be less affected by English proficiency than that of graduate students".

In a recent study which utilized the outcomes of both students' language tests and their (students, that is) own ratings, Young et al. (2012) investigated the academic success of a group of international students (n= 102) enrolled in Newcastle University in England. The study was aimed at investigiating facors which may well have an impact on student wellbeing and life experience in relation to their English language competence. Albeit that most of the participating students have achieved high scores in their IELTS examinations, nearly half of them have rated themselves to be at the middle of the study scale (i.e. between 3 and 5 where "1 = being unable to communicate in English at all to their own satisfaction; 5 = being able to communicate in English a great deal to their own satisfaction" (Young et al, ibdi: 8). Evidently, by this, students' perceived English language competence did not coincide with their IELTS grades and seemed to have an impact on student academic achievement. Conceptualizing this factor as 'language self-confidence', Yang et al. (2006: 490-491), in line with Clément (1986), reported that "[s]elf-confidence [can be] a more important predictor of language use and acculturative outcomes than actual linguistic competence." This notion was established in light of the findings of a study of a group of international students at a Canadian university. The authors noted that "[g]iven that comfort using the language of the host society facilitates the fulfillment of everyday needs, self-confidence was associated with better ability to carry out everyday tasks [, which is] consistent with the idea that fewer daily difficulties are associated with better psychological adjustment" (Yang et al., ibid:502). In a similar vein, Duru and Poyrazli (2007) found that "self-reported English competency is a significant predictor of acculturative stress". The researchers who carried out a field study of a group of Turkish students in the United States, added that "[a] higher level of English competency may help with students' general adjustment to a new culture and educational environment, as students would more likely be able to ask for help, meet new people, and participate in class discussions. This process, in turn, may reduce the level of acculturative stress Turkish international students experience" (107-108). Summarizing the above-mentioned findings, Yu and Shen (2010:77) stated that:

> L2 proficiency, integrative motivation, and linguistic confidence were significant predictors of socio-cultural adaptation...linguistic confidence was found to be the strongest predictor of socio-cultural adaptation…linguistic confidence was the strongest predictor of academic adaptation, followed by integrative motivation and L2 proficiency.(P.77)

The authors, who investigated the acculturation of a group of international students from China, concluded by reporting a strong correlation between students' perceived language competence and their academic and cultural acclimatization to the host community.

Other Second/Foreign Languages
Unlike the rapid increase in studies on language competence and student acculturation in English-speaking contexts, there is a clear lack of research in other contexts. This could be attributed to the prevalence of English as a recognized language in higher education contexts globally. Nonetheless, however, this necessitates the presence of further scholarly efforts to establish whether factors found influential (in relation to student language competence and acculturation) in English speaking settings are evident elsewhere. Pearson-Evans (2006, cited in Byram et al. 2006) carried out a longitudinal study on Irish students living in Japan between 1994 and 1995 (n=6). The participating students were, at the time of data collection, enrolled on a four-year bachelor degree study in international marketing. Prior to this, they had 24-month experience studying Japanese which makes the subjects more likely to have ample linguistic and sociocultural knowledge of their host community. However, the researcher reported that:

> Even students with low language skills expected to speak Japanese with host culture members and interpreted unwillingness on the part of their hosts to do so as a way of excluding them from Japanese culture. Being intuitively aware of the power associated with host language competence and the question of who decides what language is spoken in an interaction (Bourdieu, 1991; Kim, 1988), they reacted with resentment and sarcasm on such occasions. (Pearson-Evans 2006, cited in Byram et al. 2006:51)

Given that English was largely used amongst students in the host community (c.f. Pearson-Evans, 2006), the participating students' competence in Japanese was below expectation given the matter of fact that students in the host community were more interested in practicing English, not Japanese, with these students. In addition, Pearson-Evans (ibid) observed that mastering Japanese alone was not sufficient for the participating students according to members of the host community who viewed it as discourteous not knowing certain cultural notions and practices. However, this is not surprising in contexts such as Japan where linguistic mastery is as equally important as sociocultural mastery (Byram et al., 2006).

Discussion and Conclusion
Hitherto, a review of the literature was presented. Issues of second language competence and student acculturation were explored. This review was necessary to broaden one's knowledge in the field which will provide a deeper understanding of various aspects of the notion in hand. It is apparent thus far that a primary tendency in relevant literature distinctly revolved around the existence of correlation (albeit degrees may vary) between second language competence and desired outcomes, both lingual and academic, related to international students' acculturation and adjustment to their host communities. Further investigation is however recommended, particularly in non-English L2 contexts, perhaps in non-English speaking contexts where English is the medium of instruction, e.g. Germany. In other European contexts that resemble less targeted study destinations, Norway for instance, it was found by researchers such as Sam (2001) and Selmer and Lauring (2011) that there was no correlation between international students'

second language competence and their acculturation. This is perhaps due to the widespread use of English as a lingua franca in such contexts. However, this leads one to enquire whether the findings reported by Pearson-Evan (2006) on Irish students in Japan may well be found in other non-English contexts. One could also enquire whether learning languages other than English is as equally important for international students as learning English, both inside and outside the classroom. These questions, together with whether bi/multilingualism could be the resolution for international students' academic achievement and acculturation, are indeed fruitful areas for further exploration. For instance, research could be carried out to establish whether the European-funded 'Erasmus Intensive Language' program, which is aimed at familiarizing students with less prevalent languages, is useful in easing student integration and ensuring their apposite acculturation. If the answer is yes, then language educators and decision makers elsewhere could take an advantage of such initiative in enhancing their international students' acculturation and academic success. In sum, whilst increasing numbers of international students embark on studies in countries other than their own, the issue of second language competence and student acculturation becomes more prevalent and thus further research is required.

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