ESL Graduate Students' Academic Experience in a US Nursing Program

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of international students are coming to study in US nursing schools as part of the globalization of higher education and diversity of healthcare industry. Previous research has revealed many problems in English as a Second Language (ESL) student development, and suggestions are provided for faculty to advise these students. But the extent to which these problems persist, ESL students' development have neither been investigated at graduate level nor examined under college impact model. This empirical study uses interviews, curriculum vitae, and onsite observation to investigate the student-advisor relationship of ESL graduate students in a US nursing program. The results suggest that faculty' influence and students' effort are both significant; outweigh the importance of student's English language proficiency. Faculty' influence is found to have positive effect on ESL students 'successful academic experience if students take initiative action to overcome language difficulty while persist to learn.

Keywords: college impact; nursing; international students; English as a second language

1. Introduction

The United States is the largest and perhaps the most outstanding higher education provider for students seeking advanced education overseas in the world. Many well-prepared graduate students have come from Asian countries for many years, and among them, students with a Chinese-speaking linguistic background, including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, are the most heavily represented group at US universities (Institute of International Education, 2012a). This group of students also represents the greatest portion of international nursing students in the US (Scheele, Pruitt, Johnson, & Xu, 2011). Here, Chinese language speaking students are selected for this study to avoid over-generalization and to control the inherent variations including academic training in homeland, English language usage, and cultural backgrounds. Graduate study is an advanced study that requires academic language development to succeed, including native speakers of English. Nursing graduate students, who have English as a second language (ESL), may have a low proficiency of academic language development in English that requires they dedicate study time not just to the nursing curriculum but also to advancing their academic language development(Malu & Figlear, 1998).Among the many obstacles ESL international students need to overcome, English language problems are believed by many to be the greatest on-going struggle during their study in the United States(Abriam-Yago, Yoder, & Kataoka-Yahiro, 1999; Malu & Figlear, 1998), and may result in many academic problems or international student attrition (Jalili-Grenier & Chase, 1997; Mary Lou, 2000; K. B. Porter, 2008).

Graduate study requires academic English for disciplinary specific purposes, and this varies according to departmental context and standards(Swales & Feak, 2012). Unlike other graduate programs in the field of health science, nursing involves frequent use of English as the medium of instruction and in communication with faculty and their cohorts. Speaking and writing communications are known as primary barriers for ESL students(Guhde, 2003; K. B. Porter, 2008), however, these two English language skills are used heavily in graduate study. Graduate study needs to work closely with faculty for course selection, practicum, research project, dissertation, fellowship, scholarship, and eventually presentation in a conference or publish in the field. As a consequence, building a supportive relationship with an advisor is critically important to persist during graduate study(K. B. Porter, 2008; Shelton, 2003), however, students struggle with their academic work may be afraid to seek help that is available to them (Shelton, 2003).

The term, either advisor or faculty, used interchangeably, defined as the faculty member who provides primary academic-related supports to ESL students, either working on a coursework, project, or dissertation. Furthermore, very few studies have focus on the dynamics of faculty support provided to ESL students, despite of the fact that ESL students have been known as a population with high attrition, and most of these students will not succeed in the first semester of the nursing program(Guhde, 2003; K. B. Porter, 2008). College impact theory has reached maturity during the past thirty years on examining undergraduate students in the US, and may have indirect impact on the forming of student-advisor relationships (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991). But as Terenzini and Pascarella (1991) pointed out those international students, who have enriched the diversity to US campuses, have been given no attention in the college impact literature. This study uses college impact theory as research framework in order to understand what academic skills ESL students used to overcome their language difficulties. Hence, this problem raises the guiding research questions for the present study:

1. To what extent is the relationship between English language proficiency and ESL graduate students' academic performance?
2. What strategic skills ESL graduate students adopt to overcome their English language difficulty?

2. Literature Review

The foundational assumption for this study focuses that ESL graduate student involvement with their faculty members in an immediate academic setting is the key to successful institutional experience. Sung (2000) suggested that the institutional experience of graduate students tends to be restricted to their immediately academic surroundings, including department, lab, and conference. This assumption of student involvement, to my knowledge, has been broadly used in understanding learning and development outcomes of US undergraduate students. However, very little attempts are used to understand their international cohorts(Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). College impact model is the conceptual basis for Astin's IEO model, Input, Environment, and Outcome(Astin, 1984, 1993). Given that majority of international students pursuit at graduate level, very differ in undergraduate experiences, motivation, and commitment. ESL graduate students' language barrier, cultural adjustment, and financial burden to a certain extent influence their academic capacity to success; in addition, at some extent these barriers may influence their relationship building with faculty members. From this perspective, two factors typically influence ESL graduate students' success: (1) students' effort, defined as ESL graduate students' purposeful academic activities involving faculty members(Hu & Kuh, 2003; Hu & McCormick, 2012; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), (2) immediate academic environment, defined as department and faculty support to achieve the standard of their degree (Abriam-Yago et al., 1999; Astin, 1984, 1993; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). For the purpose of this study, this study seeks to understand how these ESL graduate students overcome their English barriers and cultural difference while as the same time initiate meaningful interactions with faculty members in nursing context. The term academic performance takes a non-conventional definition here, but it would suit the circumstance of US graduate study, including students' experience with advisor, fellowship, scholarship, dissertation, conference presentation, and publication.

3. Research Method

This study was conducted at a large research university in the United States. This university is one of the top ten US institutions hosting international students for years(Institute of International Education, 2012b). The population of the nursing graduate students has been approximately75for the past ten years. Students' ages range from the early 20s to early 60s. The majority of students are female, study full-time, 40% are minority students, 22% are international students, and 54% of enrolled students have more than six years of nursing experience prior to entering the program. The selective admission process requires international graduate students to achieve high academic standard and academic English language proficiency. The university typically enrols a number of ESL graduate students. All participants were purposefully sampled on the basis of their background and unique ability to explain, understand, and provide information for the questions under study. The participants were female, in their late 20s and early 30s, and had earned master's degree in nursing in the US. They are identified as Ann, Betty, Christina, and Dina. One student declined the invitation for interview because of her barely could handle academic workload. Pseudonyms were given for all participants in the interest of confidentiality.

3.1 Data Collection

Data were collected from departmental, institutional, national records, and participants self-provided curriculum vitae. Interviews were used to capture the richness and accuracy of data, and the data were transcribed, coded, and reviewed for each participant during the process of data collection. A wide variety of documents were reviewed, including national statistical reports such as Open Doors 2011, 2012, and institutional statistical reports such as English skill requirements, English re-evaluation results, the departmental admission package, departmental booklets, enrolment reports, official websites for graduate students, graduate course guides, and participants 'self-provided curriculum vitae, including conference presentation, publication and assistantships. Most documents were reviewed before the first interview took place, and then reviewed again during the data triangulation process. Moreover, the author spoke to two senior ESL instructors at the institution to get insides of ESL graduate students' academic problems, and ESL students' usages of English language help.

4. Data Analysis

The interview data were coded, analyzed, and categorized, and emergent themes were identified. These documents were analyzed by content analysis procedures, and interview data were examined using interpretive analysis in order to look for patterns or constructs that could provide insights to this study. Triangulation was performed by cross-examining the above data sources in the effort to look for factors that could describe and explain how English language proficiency affects ESL graduate students' academic success, and what the respondents do to overcome their difficulties during the degree seeking process. Respondents' speaking skills were collected from the digital recorded interviews and were used as measurements of their English language proficiency. As speaking skills are used on daily basis and are the most critical communicative skills in many formal or informal activities(Guhde, 2003; A. Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011); English language development takes years to develop (Abriam-Yago et al., 1999), and same in any learning (Malu & Figlear, 1998).

As mentioned earlier, speaking and writing communications are known as primary struggles for ESL students and may result in attrition(Guhde, 2003; K. B. Porter, 2008). This information leads the researcher to collect participants' academic speaking and writing samples. Participants' speaking skill data were collected from interview, but collecting participants' writing sample was a little complicated. Some only have a couple of term papers to share; only one participant showed conference manuscript with the help from advisor. The problem is that the author is not sure if the participants received any sort of help in writing papers; therefore, evaluating participants' writing samples may not accurately reflect their real writing ability in the present study. At any rate, the author still asked during interview to verify whether the participants seek help.At least, the author thinks getting language help from the institution shows a good indication that these students want to success, and they care. Following this perspective, writing content is not evaluated; however, the author looked for student self-report experiences including submitting papers to conference and/or journals, and what they did to achieve this goal.

4.1 Scale for English Language Assessment

A validated speaking proficiency scale was adopted to evaluate the respondents' English language proficiency. This scale was developed and has been used for years at University of Michigan to assess ESL teaching assistants 'speaking skills, and is a reliable scale. This scale uses the controls of linguistic repertoire, speech production, instructional context awareness and verbal and non-verbal interactive communication techniques as assessment criteria. The scale has five points, with the highest point five, representing that the student has superior use of English as second language. The acceptable score for teaching is four in most departments, 4- in labs only; those who score 3+ or below are not allowed to teach any classes.

5. Results and Discussions

The findings of the present study suggest a few points. First, respondents 'English speaking skill ranged between score 3- and 4- on the Teaching Assistants Rating Scale. The scores suggested that even the most proficient student would probably not qualify for a teaching assistantship in the field of liberal arts at this selected institution. Second, although all respondents had met the admission requirement of English, they still showed different skilfulness in using English language, more or less felt powerless with their limited academic language skills.

Those clearly showed insufficient academic English skills seem to increase their stressfulness toward degree completion; however, their language barriers do not stop them from forming their meaningful relationship with faculty members. Third, the present study clearly implies that many factors other than English language proficiency are significant to academic success(Graham, 1987). Those students with less sufficient skills in academic English, also has constant and serious thoughts about quitting their study, for example, Christina and Dina. Finally, the results showed that academic success was clearly divided in the nursing graduate program. Respondents, who have positive attitude and are willing to put efforts in overcoming their language difficulties, showed a virtuous circle of academic success. On the other hand, those who do not take initiative action to seek academic help would result in a frustrated situation, and eventually may fell into a vicious circle of academic attrition. In the following sections, the author discusses the findings of divided academic success and the nurturing faculty support environment that respondents shared.

5.1 Divided Academic Success: Students' Effort Matters

In this section, the author focused on what students do to overcome their difficulties with English barriers, then compare and contrast the developmental experience of successful and less likely successful students, and what we can learn from their stories.

5.1.1 Virtuous Circle

Ann is a student who has demonstrated a good case of academic success, and is persistent in pursuing her academic goals. She understands the importance of English, and knows where to get help. She has been self-motivated in getting academic writing help from a retired faculty member on a regular basis with an on-going research project. She has met with a retired faculty member every two or three weeks since she began to work on her preliminary proposal and has shown high satisfactory. Ann said that, Having a nursing faculty to look at my papers is very good because she knows the terminology in the field and the expectation of nursing journals. This is much better than the writing workshops offered by the University. Ann's frequent visits to this retired faculty member have rewarded her with a meaningful relationship that expands well beyond academic writing to a more personal level. ESL students' effort and willingness to take initiative in seeking help would eventually reward them both academically and socially, at the end of the road retain in the program. The findings reflect the conceptual framework proposed at the present study; that is, students 'continuous effort in overcoming English language difficulty would result a satisfactory institutional experience. Most importantly, knowing where to get help, what need help, and who can help would significantly improve on ESL students' academic success.

5.1.2 Vicious Circle

Just like some studies in nursing suggested that ESL students are more likely to failure from the program (Guhde, 2003; K. B. Porter, 2008). During the interview process, the author found that this group of students are more likely to talk about quitting the school. Both Christina and Dina reported less satisfaction with their study although they also reported having close personal relationships with their advisors. This group of students not only show English, academic, and social problems, but also are indecisive as to what specialization they want to pursue, and are constantly thinking about quitting their studies. During the interview, the author asked both Christina and Dina if they know any supports that they can get either from faculty, advisor, program, institution or even external help with their problems."I don't have time," both Christina and Dina replied. Weak time management skills kept them away from actively seeking academic and language help. Dina further explained that, Many professors tell me to look for English help, but I don't have time…my advisor doesn't help me to edit my papers. I don't get any writing help. I don't have time to look for help in writing. Porter (2008) pointed out that "faculty support can make a significant difference in the retention of nursing student" (p.4). This view may just holds half of picture. To a certain degree no matter how much support that faculty could provide, if students do not take initiative to seek help, knowing what help they need, and continuously doing so, they might fall into the vicious circle, sooner or later result in attrition. What this study found here is not an unusual case among ESL students. My view is that depending exclusively on faculty support is simply not enough. Students' effort and faculty support are equally important, and should be manage in a collaborative effort(Belcher, 1994), particularly for ESL students at graduate level.

5.2 Immediate Academic Environment: Faculty Support

The nursing graduate program has two parallel ways of advising students: the program director and advisors. Nursing program values the diversity of its student body while simultaneously thrives to maintain its academic excellence. Consequently, in order to better service the increasing number of ESL students, a new administrative position was created to oversee the graduate program. A foreign-born faculty member was appointed to serve in the directorship about several years ago, and she was chosen perhaps for her particular background, which international students can relate to themselves. Ann thinks that the director is the "treasure of department", and said that, The best point for my [program] is that the director is international…she knows the difficulties for international students and the cultural norms [of] Americans. She organizes meetings for international graduate students, shows us how to communicate with American faculty and students. Ann's view is generally accepted among her Chinese language speaking cohorts; however, Dina felt that the creation of new directorship has not changed anything for international students. The second layer of faculty support is from advisor. Advisor's support is particularly important for graduate candidates. For instance, Dina may think that the creation of new directorship is not useful for international students, but she apprises highly of her advisor, who she has been working with for five years. The relationship is "warm and supportive," Dina said. She further explained that, [The advisor] makes me feel that she will help me if I am in trouble…my advisor is a caring woman. She cares about every student of hers…she makes me feel comfortable to talk about everything, including personal and familial issues…political, nursing care, and education issues in Chinese language speaking region. She is just like a second mom to me.

Overall, the student-advisor relationship is personal and intimate in nursing program, and the faculty support are exceptionally nurturing. Nursing faculty offer more support to ESL students, show more tolerance for cultural and language differences, and are keen to maintain meaningful relationships with students. For such a large institution, these kinds of efforts areunusual. Based on the findings of the present study, the author found that many US faculty members do not assume the responsibility of telling students to get help with English. As educational studies suggested, ESL students approximately take two years to become skilled at basic interpersonal communication skills (Abriam-Yago et al., 1999), four to seven years to attain competence in cognitive academic language proficiency, and overall many ESL persons take four to eight years to achieve a level of language proficiency required for academic achievement (Abriam-Yago et al., 1999). Language acquisition takes time, but some ESL students are not aware of it. If faculty support can include a referral of available ESL courses offered by the university, students would have time to make difference. In the cases of students who are clearly weak in English, faculty should explicitly and constantly advise those students to get professional language help from the university ESL courses and writing workshops at early stage of study.As the development of ESL students' English language skills is widely considered as important, investigating methods of encouraging faculty in efforts at promoting English language supports for students ought to be a key focus in the future research.

5.3 Limitations

A few limitations still exist in this study, most of which are not true limitations, but are simply a product of the particular design. First, the findings will be most useful for nursing graduate programs. Second, the findings should be used with caution for ESL graduate students from other linguistic background (for example, European students). Nevertheless, the findings still provide an understanding of the proposed research questions. Most importantly, the findings help to illustrate the academic needs and struggles of ESL students, and what the students do to overcome these problems.

6. Conclusion

In many ways, faculty influence and support outweighed the importance of student's language proficiency in this study. Such influence and support could help students to overcome mental, language, academic, and cultural difficulties, to attain a more satisfactory graduate experience, and complete their degrees. The most successful students typically work well with faculty and are self-motivated when it comes to problem solving. Prior studies also suggested that working well with advisors helps students to succeed (Belcher, 1994). Students' effort has more direct influence on whether students voluntarily seek needed help to solve their problems. At this selective program, students' effort to improve their English remains the key factor for them actually improving their skills. Most importantly, with faculty support, ESL students thrive.

Finally, the long-term aim of this study is to better inform nursing faculty and students that solid academic preparation and required examinations are merely the very initial steps toward academic success in graduate programs. Nursing graduate programs should formulate innovative and collaborative solutions to advance the increasing global collaboration within the academic community.

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