

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or  
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Engaging Diverse International Students: Promising Online  
Teaching Practices**

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**Abstract**

*With COVID-19 forcing post-secondary educational institutions to shift to open and online learning, understanding the needs of international students is more important than ever before. This paper will explore the connection between the promising practices for teaching online linguistically and culturally diverse international students with international student satisfaction and perceptions of learning. The study collected data through 15 individual interviews. Data analysis identified the teaching practices and individual characteristics that resonate with international student satisfaction and perceptions of learning. Recommendations for professional practice are discussed, along with potential areas for further research.*

**Keywords:** online, open learning, international students, student satisfaction, student perceptions

## **Introduction**

With the current global pandemic, online learning has become the new norm for most students across the world. It is estimated that approximately 90% of all learning will be online during the time span of COVID-19 (Radcliff et al., 2020). Although this shift to online learning was involuntary, North American online education has seen a rise in popularity in recent years, even before the pandemic hit. Finding strategies to teach culturally and linguistically diverse international students in online settings is essential to ensure the successful completion of courses by these students. Studies conducted by Grayson (2008), He & Banham (2011), and Kim et al. (2015) have found gaps in academic performance between international and domestic students. The partial reason for this is because international students experience language difficulties, culturally-related learning differences, academic support issues, and adjustment to a new educational system (Smith, 2016). This leads to international students being less satisfied with the student experience, and less engaged in the classroom than their domestic peers (Kim et al., 2015).

This study is guided by Tinto's student retention model (Tinto, 1993), and Darby and Lang's (2019) research, which finds that the personality of the professor can affect student learning. It is also influenced by the research conducted by Smith et al. (2019) on the best practices for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse international students. It will also use the Framework for Teaching and Learning for International Students developed by Tran (2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore the connection between the promising practices for teaching online linguistically and culturally diverse international students and individual instructor characteristics, with international student satisfaction and perceptions of learning to enhance international student teaching and learning in postsecondary educational institutions.

The following two research questions guided this study:

1. How satisfied are international online students with the online teaching strategies presented and what are their perceptions of learning with these strategies?
2. What personal characteristics do international students feel improve/hinder their learning experiences online? What personal characteristics of their instructors do they feel improve/hinder their learning experiences online?

## **Literature Review**

After a thorough review of the literature, related to the steps that can be taken to improve international student learning in open and/or online settings, two main themes were identified: the importance of providing clear communication and ensuring instruction is student-centred.

### **Communication**

Clear communication is necessary for the academic success of international students. This includes building community and socialization. Encouraging student interaction in discussion boards (Darby & Lang, 2019) and presence of the instructor are ways community and socialization can be accomplished. Communication outside of the classroom is also important, as international students value teacher-student relationships (Paralejas, 2007). When communicating with international students, it is also crucial to distinguish between basic proficiency and academic proficiency; these do not necessarily have to be related, as one does not precede the other (Cummins, as cited in Kinsella, 1997). Lastly, verbal and visual

communication should be used to make lectures optimal for learning by paraphrasing, summarising, and repeating difficult or key concepts, and by using diagrams, charts, and pictures (Haque, 2004; Jiminez, 2017; Kinsella, 1997).

## **Student-Centred Learning**

For many international students, student-centred learning is a new experience, as most of them come from a teacher-centred learning culture. Chen and Bennett (2012) found that students' problems in acculturating to their online courses arose, at least in part, from a clash between their home and host educational cultures. Therefore, introducing students to western educational practices can greatly increase learning and student satisfaction (Smith et al., 2019). Taking the time to understand the needs of each student in a classroom is also necessary for optimal learning, and can be done by gaining knowledge of students' backgrounds and previous educational experiences (Kinsella, 1997), by assessing students' comfort with the use of technology (Woodley et al., 2017), and by providing clear and helpful constructive criticism on assignments to allow for greater understanding (Paralejas, 2007). Ensuring students come to class prepared has been linked to higher learning achievements and can be done by encouraging students to complete readings before class, giving discussion assignments as homework, and giving tips on how to organize workload, online lectures, note-taking and studying (Hwang & Hsu, 2011; Kinsella, 1997; Lineweaver, 2010; Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2011). Differentiated instruction, such as the use of multi-modal instruction, should also be used in the online classroom to better support open learners in such isolated environments (Mestre & Woodard, 2006).

There are many strategies that can be implemented to improve the learning of international students, but as with any research, there are disparities in the literature. There was little information found related to the challenges that first-time online students face, the effectiveness of strategies for supporting online students outside the region of the institution, the impact of differing course loads and various academic expectations, and the effectiveness of online courses for non-English speaking students.

## **Methods**

This study used a qualitative research design, which included individual interviews. There were 15 interview participants, who were international students from a mid-sized, comprehensive university in Ontario, Canada. Graduate students made up 53% of the participants and seven were in non-STEM programs (STEM being science, technology, engineering, and mathematics' programs), while the remaining were in STEM programs. Participants were recruited to fill out an online survey questionnaire to indicate their interest in the interviews through individual emails, mass emails sent to the institution's international student list serve, class announcements, and verbal recommendations. A prize draw was used to encourage participation.

## **Results**

Generally, student-learning satisfaction was a mix of being satisfied and unsatisfied. Many students expressed appreciation for their instructor's hard work during these

unprecedented times, but a greater number of students (60%) felt that online learning was not a suitable replacement. Although there were a variety of different opinions on digital learning, the three primary factors that altered online learning were communication, sense of belonging, and assessment practices. Table 1 presents a summary of the interviewees responses to the questions relating to the three factors above.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Responses Regarding Primary Factors Associated with Open or Online Education*

Factor	Summary of Responses
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication outside of the classroom shifted to digital conversations.</li> <li>• Many students voiced concern with communication during lectures and assignment feedback received.</li> <li>• Most students were satisfied with the communication received on classroom expectations.</li> </ul>
Sense of Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of community in the online learning environment, although there were communication tools used outside of the classroom.</li> <li>• Most student connections were through discussion boards, but not all instructors utilized this feature.</li> <li>• Online learning was very isolated and stressful, and students felt they had to learn everything on their own.</li> <li>• Questions and interactions were encouraged during class.</li> <li>• Students did not feel any discrimination and enjoyed it when they had group projects, because it allowed them to get to know their classmates.</li> </ul>
Assessment Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students could not go back on a test once an answer was submitted.</li> <li>• Drastic differences in grades between group members of the same project were noticed.</li> <li>• Most courses used few assessments and relied on multiple-choice tests.</li> <li>• Low grades were experienced by students who do not feel comfortable participating in class discussions.</li> <li>• Marking done by graduate assistants was unfair and unorganized.</li> <li>• Some students believed the grading was fair.</li> </ul>
Other Notable Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many students experienced a lack of culturally responsive teaching. Some also added that it would not add to their learning.</li> <li>• There was a lack of differentiated instruction, such as multi-modal instruction.</li> <li>• There was dissatisfaction with group members' input for projects, so peer-review forms were appreciated.</li> <li>• Online learning is tiring if students do not get a break.</li> <li>• Most students prefer synchronous learning, although there are some benefits to asynchronous learning.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online platforms are easy to use, although some students believe instructors need more training.</li> <li>• The Internet is unreliable at times.</li> <li>• Almost all the students appreciated the student-centred teaching implemented by instructors.</li> </ul>
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Communication was the biggest change noticed by international students receiving online education. Many emphasized the lack of communication in the digital world. One of the participants stated, “It’s difficult to start discussions, or maybe I don’t know this kind of communication,” then continues to explain that her overall online learning experience was unsatisfactory for that reason. Poor communication during lectures (such as instructors speaking too quickly), unclear instructions on assignments, and lack of feedback all played a role in decreasing student perceptions of learning.

The classroom climate was another element that changed when education shifted to online, altering the sense of belonging. Almost all participants agreed that there was a lack of community in the online-learning environment. One student explained, “I was actually lonely, and this is why I would never take asynchronous classes.” Many students felt they had to rely on themselves to learn the content and did not know who to turn to for help. A few students also explained how the online classroom was stressful for them; having to speak up during class and writing in the chat boxes, whose content would be visible by everyone all semester long, made some students think twice before participating. Some instructors did their best to enhance belonging by calling out students by name; two students mentioned this during their interviews and said they appreciated the instructors’ efforts.

The change in assessment practices was the third primary factor that altered international student learning in online/open environment. The inability to go back on tests (in an effort to reduce breach of academic integrity), lack of variety in assessment types, poor grading done by graduate assistants, and lack of preparation for online learning were all ways the participants felt grading changed for the worse. Some students said that they think they are doing just as well as they would have if the courses were in person.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

From this study, we can see how the change to online learning has affected culturally and linguistically diverse learners. The literature stated the importance of clear communication (Haque, 2004), building community within the classroom (Darby & Lang, 2019), and fair assessment practices (Beck, 2008), and from our findings, we noticed that the negative perception of online learning was due to the lack of these practices. Students felt isolated and alone, and this sudden change to online learning left them confused about how to be students. The literature states that this plays a big role in how students acculturate to online learning (Chen & Bennett, 2012), and here we see the effects of the lack of community in the online setting. The silence during class, the lack of interaction, and the new way of grading was, and still is, a difficult adjustment. From the interview responses, we noticed that even the efforts made to build community were not always successful: group work was appreciated, but some students did not do their fair share of the work; discussion boards were not always used; and students did not participate because of their accents when speaking. The literature also emphasized the value of student-centred teaching (Kinsella, 1997), and our findings aligned

with this statement, as this practice was one that almost all participants agreed was present, and one that shed a positive light on the online-learning experience.

Educators who have international students in their online classrooms should continue to use the following teaching practices as they created increased satisfaction and increased perceptions of learning: clarifying classroom expectations, being aware of diversity and inclusion, fostering a positive online learning environment, and focusing on student-centred teaching. With the unanticipated changes that came with COVID-19, it is important that institutions work to continue to provide such education for these individuals by following, and building on, the best teaching practices shown to enhance learning.

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