

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

**Graduate International Students' Perceptions
of Involuntary Online Learning: A Longitudinal Case Study**

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Abstract

This ongoing longitudinal case study explores five international graduate students' perceptions of online learning, particularly concerning their transition from in-person to online courses as a product of COVID-19, in order to better understand the affordances and challenges associated with this medium of instruction. Thematic analysis is used to identify emerging trends from qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Findings indicate that (1) all the participants acknowledge and appreciate certain aspects of online learning, (2) some students are easily distracted and face a lack of motivation during synchronous classes, (3) English comprehension difficulties are enhanced for some individuals in the online interface, and (4) students struggle to build relationships and participate in Zoom sessions because of cultural differences and a lack of social cues. Pedagogical implications are then discussed.

Keywords: International Students, Online Learning, Perceptions

Introduction

Research related to international students' perceptions of online learning indicates that academic and informal English (Tan et al., 2010), cultural differences (Kang & Chang, 2016; Kung, 2017), a lack of multicultural course content, plagiarism, and time zone differences, are barriers that international students face (Liu et al., 2010). It also seems that many international students feel that classroom interaction is either lacking or difficult to engage in (Leem et al., 2018; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Other evidence shows that the lack of social cues in the online setting are barriers to learning for both domestic (Tichavsky et al., 2015) and international students (Zhang & Kenny, 2010).

Hence, this case study explores five international graduate students' perceptions of online learning at a U.S. university to better understand the affordances and challenges associated with their participation in online learning. A combination of the political climate, COVID-19, and physical separation from friends, family, and colleagues shaped each of the participants' lives, and, as a derivative, each of their educational experiences. Accordingly, the following findings and discussions aim to highlight salient sociocultural and language-related manifestations specific to international students' experiences with online learning. Prominent findings indicate that (1) English comprehension difficulties are enhanced in the online interface, (2) students struggle to build relationships and participate in class because of English-related dynamics and a lack of social cues, (3) some students are easily distracted and face a lack of motivation during synchronous classes, and (4) students acknowledge and appreciate certain aspects of online learning.

Literature Review

Online learning has become the norm for many students this past year; however, it has been utilized for quite some time in the higher educational setting, and its general advantages are well documented (Dumford & Miller, 2018). For instance, online education has widened access to education and facilitates intercultural learning and interaction. Additionally, online education has great benefits for international students who are learning in a language other than their native one. - For example, such students have the opportunity to improve both passive and active language skills, both synchronously and asynchronously (Alkhouday, 2020). However, despite the many advantages and benefits of online education, there is, of course, room for improvement, especially in terms of accommodating the academic and social needs of international students.

Research related to international students' perceptions of online learning indicates that academic and informal English (Tan et al., 2010; Zhang & Kenny, 2010), cultural differences (Kang & Chang, 2016; Kung, 2017; Phirangee & Malec, 2017), a lack of multicultural course content, plagiarism, and time zone differences, are barriers that international students face (Liu et al., 2010). It also seems that international students feel that classroom interaction is either lacking or difficult to engage in (Leem et al., 2018; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Tichavsky et al., 2015). Other evidence shows that the lack of, or fewer, social and verbal cues in the online setting are a source of difficulty for all students (Tichavsky et al., 2015), but particularly for international students' abilities, because they rely on these cues to process instructions and engage in discussions (Zhang & Kenny, 2010).

Additionally, the literature demonstrates that the instructor plays a critical role in the online classroom in terms of how they facilitate communication and respond to cultural differences (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Leem et al., 2018; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Some students even feel that some instructors lack the intercultural knowledge and pedagogical strategies necessary to be effective instructors of international students who struggle with academic English (Kung, 2017), and that they need to be more cognizant of cultural differences in order to create an equitable experience (Liu, et al, 2010).

Lastly, although this is far from an exhaustive review, the literature indicates that international students have unique difficulties getting comfortable with online learning and that there is a gap in research regarding international students' perceptions of online learning. Researchers in this area have called for more nuanced studies concerning how international students perceive and experience online learning (Rizvi et al., 2019; Ruthotto et al., 2020), and this study will serve to partially answer this call. A highly contextualized and nuanced study of the international student perceptions of online learning will help institutions and instructors better understand the benefits and difficulties associated with participation in online learning and avoid unintentional "othering" of this population (Phirangee, & Malec, 2017).

Methods

The five participants of this study were international graduate students at a private university in the northeastern U.S. (see Table 1 for Participant Information). None of the students initially enrolled in their programs of study with the intention of taking any online classes, which is an important distinction because their experiences likely differ from students who set out to enroll in entirely online degree programs. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging trends from qualitative data collected from two rounds of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations (Fereday & Muir, 2006). The following findings represent salient data related to difficulties and affordances related to the intersection of English language and online learning.

Table 1
Participant Information

Pseudonym (Gender)	Home Country	Languages	Degree	Years as a student in the US	Data Collected	Online Education Experience
Eunbi (F)	South Korea	Korean & English	2 nd Year PhD	3.5	2 interviews & observations	Yes (Teacher Professional Development)
Shin (M)	South Korea	Korean & English	2 nd Year PhD	1.5	2 interviews & observations	Yes (Teacher Professional Development)
Hyuk (M)	South Korea	Korean & English	2 nd Year PhD	1.5	2 interviews & observations	Yes (Teacher Professional Development)

Ana (F)	Chile	Spanish, English, & French	2 nd Year PhD	1.5	2 interviews & observations	No
Guo (M)	China	Chinese (Mandarin) & English	2 nd Year MA	1.5	1 interview	Yes (TOEFL Tutoring)

Results and Discussion

Enhanced English Difficulties

Although each of the participants reported notable improvement in their overall English ability between their first and second year, it seemed that the switch to online learning, as a result of COVID-19, enhanced certain language barriers for some international students. Hyuk accounted how the transition to online classes was difficult to adapt to:

...for the international students... I assume it (online class) is very demanding because it is harder to understand what other people are saying, and it's harder to express speaking English... last semester I was frequently under stress whenever I speak something, because I couldn't deliver my intention properly. So anyway, online format is even worse. (Interview #2)

When another participant, Shin, was asked about his overall experience with online courses during his second and third semesters, he said, "It's very unilateral. I barely understand anything, so I can't participate." Research related to international students' perceptions of online learning indicates that academic and informal English pose unique barriers to some members of this population (Tan et al., 2010; Zhang & Kenny, 2010). This was found to be somewhat true for at least Hyuk and Shin.

Importance of Social Cues

Three of the participants noted how the lack of social cues, such as eye contact and body language, made it difficult to engage in course discussions and understand course content. Shin commented, "I had no idea how important social cues are for communication before we had Zoom classes." These reports can be corroborated with other research that shows that the lack of, or fewer, social and verbal cues in the online setting are a source of difficulty for all students (Tichavsky et al., 2015), but particularly for international students who heavily rely on these cues to process instructions and engage in discussions (Zhang & Kenny, 2010).

This lack of social cues seems to be connected to both English ability and motivation, in that the lack of social cues can result in miscommunications, which can cause disengagement in terms of listening actively. The accountability that comes with social cues, especially eye contact, is also lost in the online format, and as Hyuk put it, "there is no push" to pay attention because it is impossible to tell who the instructor is looking at during a Zoom class.

These findings regarding the importance of social cues indicate that instructors of online classes need to be aware of the importance of these cues and utilize strategies that mitigate ambiguity of instructions and promote engagement. For instance, instructors should be mindful of providing explicit instructions, signaling transitions in the lesson, and providing both written and audio descriptions of course content.

Limited Social Interaction

Ana, Eunbi, and Shin felt there was limited social interaction during Zoom classes. Hyuk noted feeling “completely disconnected” from the campus community despite regular engagement in online courses and meetings, and Shin felt that the lack of interaction was hurting his social networking. Shin and Eunbi similarly explained that this lack of interaction has led to feeling socially isolated and unfulfilled at times. Similar reports in the literature confirm that many international students feel that interaction in general is either lacking or difficult to engage in during online classes (Leem et al., 2018; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Tichavsky et al. 2015).

Overall, cases like these highlight the importance for instructors to engage students during synchronous lessons by utilizing strategies that promote active learning; however, it seems like this is an area that is still in its developmental stage.

Reliance on Passive Learning

In a diverging finding, it seemed that some forms of online teaching caused some students to disengage in synchronous class lectures and rely on other available learning strategies. Hyuk reflected on how he is constantly distracted by other things on his computer during class. He described, “I never know when activities start or what we are supposed to be doing, but I can’t stop! It’s like I am drunk!” He reflected that his lack of focus is likely due to the lack of accountability and English difficulties due to the online interface. He continued, “It is much easier for me to catch the English if I am in a class” and that “I am less motivated to concentrate because it is online... I feel like I can just understand everything better by reading the PDFs.” Similar sentiments were expressed by Shin, and such findings indicate that reading asynchronously is a more effective way for them to acquire content knowledge than listening to synchronous class sessions, even to the point of deeming the synchronous lessons useless.

These findings are concerning, because if such students are allowed to fall back exclusively on their strengths in passive learning and asynchronous participation, they will not be motivated to develop critical listening and speaking skills. This makes it likely that they will be at a competitive disadvantage once they graduate and enter the job market. Both Hyuk and Shin have aspirations of working in the U.S., were well aware of this potential outcome, and cited it as a source of anxiety.

Positive Perceptions

Despite the many difficulties reported, each of the participants provided examples of beneficial online teaching approaches and strategies that they had experienced during their second and third semesters. Guo and Hyuk mentioned how they appreciated it when their professors were meticulous with the organization of their class time and materials. Guo noted that organization makes the lesson seem “fluent” and that it helped him to stay focused. He also explained how the instructor’s “responsiveness, attitude, and availability” helped him to concentrate, and that the professor’s motivation to engage him in conversation, “is highly important for me, for making me feel like I am improving my English.” Ana and Guo also mentioned that they found structured opportunities to interact with their classmates to be very helpful for their engagement, which again hints at the central role the instructor plays in facilitating structured interactional opportunities between all students (Leem et al., 2018; Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Conclusion

Besides reported difficulties with both productive and receptive aspects of English, the data indicated that the lack of social cues enhances English language barriers and discourages participation in online synchronous sessions. Also, the lack of formal and informal social interactions can lead to feelings of isolation and present potential barriers to improving English skills and building social, academic, and professional networks. However, ultimately, the participants' perceptions of online education need to be considered in light of the wider context and circumstances. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss in detail, the political climate, COVID-19, and physical separation from friends, family, and colleagues shaped the participants' experiences. While the discussions in this paper were limited to findings that are specific to language-related experiences with online learning, there was undoubtedly a consensus amongst the participants that "...everybody seems sick and tired of online learning right now because of COVID", as Eunbi described.

In terms of implications, in addition to contributing to the growing body of literature regarding international student perceptions of online learning, these findings may help comparable educational institutions better understand the diverse lived experiences international graduate students have with online learning. These findings also suggest that the participants' university needs to innovate their online pedagogical approaches to teaching international students to encompass strategies that help them navigate the contemporary challenges they face in the online interface.

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