

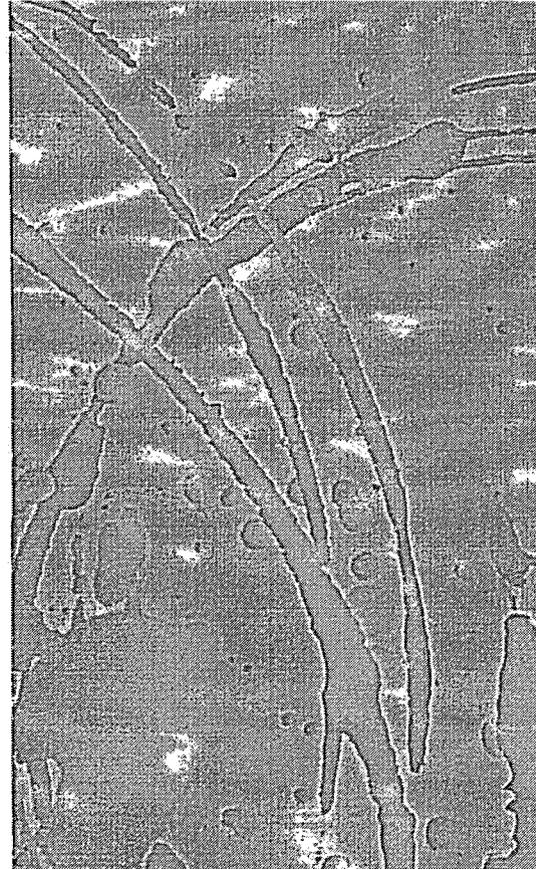
# International ESL Graduate Student Perceptions of Online Learning in the Context of Second Language Acquisition and Culturally Responsive Facilitation

Advancing technology in distance learning has allowed education to transcend the boundaries of brick and mortar schools and classrooms. Virtual learning environments enable students and teachers to share knowledge and information with colleagues around the globe (Roblyer, 2006). As distance learning technologies improve, online learning experiences are becoming ever more popular across the United States (Thompson & Ku, 2005). According to Merriam & Caffarella (1999), as the use of technology has increased in the delivery of learning programs, learning in formal settings has expanded dramatically. Indeed, the development of technology has made adult and higher education learning opportunities increasingly more accessible to a growing number of people. With the number of courses steadily increasing to meet students' needs and demands, and because programs are likewise changing to incorporate more online learning opportunities, international, English as Second Language (ESL) students are more frequently encouraged or required to take online courses to complete their programs of study at U.S. colleges and universities. Despite popular clamor for more diversity and diversity sensitivity in the classroom, little research exists regarding how

cultural differences and student perceptions affect online learning (Wang, 2007), particularly with respect to ESL students. Research in this area could inform the production of cultural awareness and culturally responsive education and thus promote more effective educational practice. In the interest of such results, this study collected and examined ESL graduate student perspectives concerning online learning experiences and how such experiences affect the development of English language skills.

## Background

Advancing technology is changing the way courses are developed and delivered around the world, particularly in higher education (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001). Increasing computer (including web and communication) technology has globalized learning through the development of online delivery vehicles; and institutions of higher education are hastening to keep up with demand and competition by developing online courses and programs to meet the needs of the growing population of students interested in obtaining education by these means (Liu, 2007). Growth in online programs is predicted to continue and even accelerate (Edelson & Pittman, 2001; Liu, 2007; Salmon, 2000) as ever more postsecondary educators



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and students obtain the necessary hardware and software (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001) to “use e-learning to minimize the costs of educational learning” (Partow & Slusky, 2001) and web delivery becomes the dominant instruction mode (Edelson & Pittman, 2001). Moreover, as colleges, universities and other educational institutions adopt online learning to increase access to learning, “cater for emerging patterns of educational involvement which facilitate lifelong learning” (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001), and reach larger numbers of worldwide and non-traditional students (Eberle & Childress, 2007), online classrooms are becoming more diverse and “continually changing with the dynamic student body from all over the world” (Liu, 2007).

Notwithstanding, technology adds complexity to education, particularly in distance learning situations (Bates, 1997). Despite offering the capability of reaching myriad students, technology is only an educational tool that can either enhance (Liu, 2007; Thompson & Ku, 2005) or hinder (Smith & Ayers, 2006) learning and understanding. In other words, the quality of learning depends on how technology is used (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001). As with face-to-face courses, in online environments, teaching involves process as much as content (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001; Ramsden, 1992). Online teaching is not an easy task (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001); to perform it at least adequately involves not only knowledge of subject matter, but of cultural awareness and a positive attitude toward diversity in the (virtual) classroom (Eberle & Childress, 2007).

Culture is learned. Anthropologists define it as “the sum total of all learned behavior . . . passed down from generation to generation through individuals and human groups . . .” exerting a profound influence on behavior, attitudes, problem solving, social interaction, values and beliefs. Cultural distinction can be identified on numerous social levels from broad (like nationality or race) to specific (like neighborhood or school), which are often called communities (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 403); and membership in such communities not only shapes all manner of social interaction, such as modes of communication and behavioral patterns (Liu, 2007), but also the learning styles and preferences of the members (Dunn & Griggs, 1995; Lanham & Zhou, 2003; Smith & Ayers, 2006). Moreover, members of groups in proximity will still produce members with significantly different learning styles (Durodoye & Hildreth, 1995; Smith & Ayers, 2006).

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While Western and Eastern cultures differ as much between their own subcultures as they do each other, international students taking classes in countries different from their home countries often face learning situations compounded by lack of knowledge, understanding of the values and language of the teaching culture, and strong values, attitudes and perceptions of their own (Eberle & Childress, 2007; Lanham & Zhou, 2003; Liu, 2007; Smith & Ayers, 2006; Wang, 2007). These gaps can perpetuate stereotypes and create hindrances and misunderstandings (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Liu, 2007; Smith & Ayer, 2006) that are exacerbated by a lack of social context

cues and communication in online situations, particularly for those students from “high context” cultures where much of a communicated message is implied in context, as opposed to

“low context” cultures where most of the communicated message is literal and in the actual words of the communication (Tu, 2001; Wang 2007). These differences affect every aspect of an online learning situation, from the kinds of assignments, to the kind of communication, to the roles of teachers that are expected and preferred (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Liu, 2007; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Tu, 2001; Wang, 2007).

Although more designers and teachers may be considering the diversity of students in creating online courses, awareness that differences exist is not enough to ensure equity in the online educational setting, especially in Western countries where college graduates have been found to be lacking in “skills associated with multicultural awareness . . .” (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001, p. 458; see also Zey, Luedke, & Murdock, 1999). Distance and other learning technologies are dominated by Western culture and cater to its teaching styles and preferences at the expense of students from non-Western cultures (Smith & Ayers, 2006), making the imposition of national chauvinism a constant, if unintended, danger for Western instructors (Eberle & Childress, 2007). Until recently, research on diversity in the online student body has focused more on student achievement or technical issues, and less on student experience (Thompson & Ku, 2005). Current research provides a plethora of suggestions on how to make online learning experiences more culturally inclusive and responsive. Although “there is no real ‘best’ design” (Smith & Ayers, 2006, p. 410), and “we cannot

guarantee avoiding mistakes” (Liu, 2007, p. 52), further research into cultural inclusiveness in online learning can point educators in the right direction, minimize undesirable outcomes, and make online learning environments as equitable as possible (Thompson & Ku, 2005). Calls have been made for future research to consider personality features and behavior patterns of cultural groups (Smith & Ayers, 2006), other cultural attributes, and student perceptions of the various dimensions of online learning (Wang, 2007). As language is an important issue, and English dominates most, if not all Western online delivery of courses (Smith & Ayers, 2006; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Wang, 2007), this study sought to pursue the vein of student perceptions particular to non-Western international ESL students taking online courses in the United States.

## Methodology

This study employed the theoretical perspective of interpretivism (Crotty, 2006) and used qualitative research methods in an attempt to investigate non-native ESL graduate student perceptions of online learning experiences in order to obtain more information regarding second language development and the effects of cultural differences in online learning environments.

This was a qualitative, phenomenological study. According to Worthen and McNeill (1996), phenomenological study focuses on individuals’ subjective experiences in an effort to understand the essence or structure of phenomena. It explores how people make sense of their experiences and convert them into consciousness individually and by sharing subsequent meaning with others (Van Manen, 1990). This particular study investigated international ESL students’ online learning experiences.

An in-depth interview method was used for data collection. Interviewees were chosen from international students whose first or official language in their home countries was not English utilizing snowball data collection procedures. First, two students were interviewed, based on volunteering recruitment. Then, the interviewees recommended additional students for participation. Subsequent interviewees were chosen in the interest of cultural diversity. In all, seven international, ESL graduate students (from the native countries of China, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Russia, and Egypt) enrolled in programs at a major Western university, have taken online courses, and participated in the study.

Each interviewee was asked eight open-ended questions (with follow-up questions) in individual, 25-to

30-minute, face-to-face interviews. Interview questions were designed to ascertain information including, but not limited to, the following perceptions: likes and dislikes about online learning experiences; the effects (positive and negative) of online learning on English language acquisition; the effect of online learning regarding individual learning styles; the effects of online learning on individual attitude, motivation, and anxiety toward learning; and how cultural differences affect online learning in comparison to face-to-face class experiences.

The interviews were audio-taped and tapes were transcribed. Field notes were taken and reflection journals were written immediately after the interviews. Data was analyzed based on themes and categories according to the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interview transcriptions, notes, and reflection journals were used to triangulate the data. The findings of the study generated emergent themes from the data analysis.

## Findings

Of the seven participants in the study, six had previously taken one or more online courses. One participant was enrolled in her first online course at the time of the interview. All agreed that both language and culture differences presented formidable challenges in online learning situations and all avoided taking more than one online course at a time (or per semester) because of these challenges. Attitudes toward online learning generally tended to be more positive among participants with more proficient language skills, online course experience, and time spent in the U.S.

### *Language Acquisition*

*Vocabulary.* Online learning seems to motivate and accommodate the development of vocabulary and the use of standardized English. One student seemed to be satisfactory with the vocabulary learning by noting:

This summer, in the online course, I learned quite a lot of new vocabulary. I always expanded all the postings and read the postings one by one. I wrote down the words and expressions that I did not know at all or that I was ambiguous about. I am happy that I could do it and had such a great chance to learn.

Another student expressed her opinion on learning vocabulary through an online course, “Yes, I felt like they are live and useful words, because the others were using them. I had a motivation to learn them. I felt they were much easier to remember.”

Conversely, the use of vernacular phrases and acronyms was confusing to most, causing considerable

**anxiety and occasional embarrassment.** As one participant explained, “they used too many colloquial expressions and slang [in] the discussions. I was often puzzled why they used these informal expressions in class.”

*Reading and writing.* According to participant responses, online learning experiences have a positive effect on English reading and writing skills. Most conveyed that online courses promoted writing with care for an audience, providing opportunity for editing and revising correspondence before posting it to electronic classroom forums. Most of the participants expressed the perception that their U.S.-based online courses have made writing English easier and they are more skillful and prolific in that capacity. One participant described another positive factor inherent in online learning situations regarding motivation for reading:

In face-to-face class, if I fail to finish my readings, I could still get some general ideas from the instructor and the peers in class. This is not true in online courses. If I don't read, I cannot post and respond to others. If I do not post and respond, then I could not get credits.

Another student indicated her improvement of writing skills from online course by stating:

The thing I benefit most from online learning is writing. Before I took the online course, I always felt so difficult to write in English. Sometimes I had no thoughts about what to continue to write. The online course changed me to some degree. I felt a lot easier to write to answer questions and respond to my peers. I felt it was not writing just for writing, but writing to talk with people.

*Listening and speaking.* **In contrast, all participants perceived that their online experiences have done nothing to improve English listening and speaking skills.** None of the courses taken by these individuals offered any audio or visual vehicles for learning. One participant's comments express the sentiment of the group. “I wish we had some video or audio clips interwoven in the online course. In that case, I could learn by listening and speaking and, therefore, I could improve my listening and speaking skills too.”

### **Cultural Differences**

**Regarding aspects of culture and cultural diversity, the participants expressed overall dissatisfaction, holding the perception that very few instructors and peers pay attention to such issues.** Moreover, **participants collectively perceived that online learning does not promote cultural understanding between international students, instructors and peers.** In fact, cultural considerations

created or exacerbated perceived challenges with technology used in online learning.

*Lack of trust and/or experience using technology.* Three participants who had little technological experiences in home countries expressed apprehension in using technology to send messages. These students were troubled by the thought of sending messages “to nowhere.” Three other participants coming from cultures that use little technology described anxiety from the difficulty of learning the technology and subsequent distrust of it.

*Time management.* Three participants conveyed the difficulty they had using time effectively in online situations. The cause of this particular challenge stems from cultural traditions of striving for perfection to avoid shame. One of these participants offered the following explanation, which expounds on more subtle ramifications of the issue and consequent problems:

I could not discipline myself well in learning. The reason is rooted in my culture, I guess. I always wanted to be perfect, and I always read all others' postings first to make sure I was on the right track when I posted. **I was not confident about my understanding of the contents and American culture. This made me always postpone the participation.** Plus, I saw many people back in my country wait to do the things until the last minute. I am probably also like them.

*Cultural shocks from online conversations.* Over half the participants expressed emotions as strongly as “shock” to some cultural differences evident in online experiences. Four were astonished at the way American students incorporated personal experiences, feeling and opinions into their online discussions. Such amazement was caused by differences in cultural conventions; in the non-native cultures in question, class time is reserved solely for “academic” discussion. One participant explained this perception:

In my culture, if it is an academic discussion, there will not be even a single personal thing involved. It was absolutely a cultural shock when I expanded everybody's postings to read and found that many times they were chatting about their personal travels and hobbies, which, in my eyes, had no relation with the academic content we were discussing. That wasted my time. I did not feel it was valuable to spend time to read those.

### **Hindrance to Culturally Responsive Teaching**

**All participants expressed the perception that online learning does not promote cultural understanding as much**

as face-to-face learning. One student noted, "I felt that I could not understand others well, nor could I be understood by others. I prefer to take the classes where professors and students can meet and discuss. In that case, it is better for me to understand and to be understood." Another student expressed disappointment in this regard as well:

In online class, you do not see people's facial expression and remarking tones that can usually give you a hint whether they like or dislike you. You do not see that anyone really cares about where you are from and who you are. I seemed to be in an emotionless world, and it seems that I was not there.

One student expressed directly a sense of loneliness in online learning, he noted that "I felt quite lonely." several times throughout the interview. As a corollary, one participant expressed disappointment at the perception that online learning experiences do not promote or encourage the continuation of student relationships beyond the duration of the course. He explained:

Based on my culture, I always hoped to keep the relationships with my peers even after the course was finished, I would like to make friends with them. But, with online courses, you could never expect so, because you never knew the people really.

Another student joked about this, asserting, "I did not know my classmates. I did not really. If one of my classmates sits beside me on an occasion, I would not know. It just does not cultivate friendship." Six of the seven participants expressed willingness to share, explain and discuss their cultures online to foster understanding and avoid at least some of the issues previously discussed.

## Discussion and Recommendations

The data indicate that perceptions differ between individual participants. For instance, while some participants saw the lack of face-to-face contact in online learning programs as a liability, others perceived it to be a benefit, noting that they were able to keep pace with communication better and comprehend more in online courses than they would have in comparable face-to-face courses. Overall, participants decidedly perceived advantages and disadvantages to regarding ESL acquisition as well as disadvantages associated with cultural differences. While participants perceive benefits in online learning situations regarding opportunities for English vocabulary-building and improving reading and writing skills, they perceive no benefits regarding the improvement of listening and speaking skills as well as marked

disadvantages in the confusion caused by native use of vernacular phrases and acronyms. Participants also identified perceived challenges regarding culturally related difficulty with time management, lack of trust and/or experience using technology, and the nature and content of some online discussions. In general, students reported that online learning is not promoting culturally responsive teaching as well as face-to-face classes. For some, these challenges are exacerbated by the lack of recognition and understanding of cultural differences as well as lack of fostering community-building and retention.

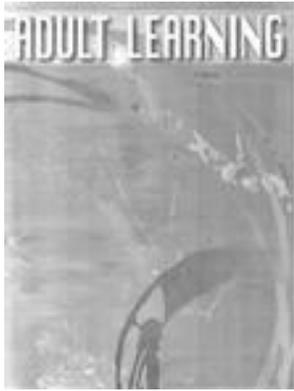
Further research might more extensively probe (in more detail and with larger samples) the causes and effects of online learning on international ESL graduate and undergraduate students who have come to the U.S. for education, while simultaneously or consecutively examining ways to eliminate or at least alleviate identified or perceived challenges and consequent stresses of online learning. Meanwhile, researchers for this particular study have composed the following suggestions for minimizing identified challenges and stresses in order to make online learning experiences for non-native ESL students as comfortable and effective as possible. Perhaps most importantly, instructional designers should anticipate and consider the possibility of cultural differences in students, and incorporate diversity and cultural understanding into lesson plans. Audio and visual features of online learning technology should be more fruitfully used to foster ESL listening and speaking skills. Syllabi should be detailed to include schedules for assignments, suggestions and other information to help with time management.

Instructors should provide information and direction for learning technology, or technological procedures particular to a course or delivery vehicle, and not assume that such information is obvious or readily available to non-native students. Instructors should also remind all students in an online course to use standard English at all times, avoiding slang and acronyms and impertinent or informal acronyms. Finally, instructors should encourage posting photographs and benign personal information at the beginning of the course, allow students to journal online when possible, and provide alternative forms of communication and opportunities to meet in person when needed and feasible. These latter actions should serve to foster cultural understanding and build community and trust. The researchers for this study have derived these suggestions from the collected data and believe, when followed in good faith, can at least alleviate most of the challenges international ESL students face in online learning experiences in the U.S.

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