

How adjustment issues affect international students in American colleges and universities

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Abstract: This research determined how adjustment issues affect international students in American colleges and universities. The research examined various literature published on international students and the ways that they adjust to American colleges and universities, we also developed qualitative, primary data to help answer our survey questions. Based on the analyzed survey, we discovered the following as factors that affected international students: English proficiency, language anxiety, homesickness, and cultural adjustment.

Keywords: Cultural adjustment, anxiety, homesickness, language anxiety.

1. INTRODUCTION

International students contribute a lot to most educational institution in the United States; as a result, universities were doing everything to increase the enrollment of international students, because they bring economic and educational value to their institutions. Furthermore, universities were trying to become more knowledgeable about issues that students faced when they leave their home country and move to the United States for further studies. International students experience many adjustment issues while being enrolled in American universities and colleges.

Most American universities have an international page on the university's website that states what support services they provide for international students. However, sometimes it is not enough and students still experience adjustment issues. For instance, as an international student from Serbia and I had experienced the cultural shock of moving to a new country. I left home after graduating high school and that was my first time being away from home. The experience I got from my community college was not the best that made me almost leave college and go back home. These adjustment issues also influenced my academic achievements. Some of the adjustment issues that I experienced were language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness, and homesickness. I also had a hard time establishing relationships with Americans.

International students can experience American universities positively and negatively, but that depends greatly on the support services that the university offers. Americans do not have the same perspective of doing things as many of the countries where international students were born. Students from diverse backgrounds have different interpretations of languages, signs, and other forms of communication. Western cultures are direct and the meaning is seemingly obvious. Other cultures tend to be discrete in the way they present their message. For instance, one greets a Westerner with a handshake and all will be well where as if you greet an easterner in the same way, they could see the gesture as a sign of disrespect. As a result, communication between a Westerner and a non-Westerner can result in confusion at the university. Of course, all these challenges depend on personal level factors, for example, language fluency and coping ability.

While going through the adjustment period, international students can experience language anxiety. Language is the most common issue for international students. International students may have trouble fully understanding what the professors is discussing during the class, participating in classroom discussions, and comprehending what is expected of them in the classroom setting due to these language barriers. This can also be a struggle for the professor because they may not be able to fully understand the needs of their international students. However, international students need the confidence to speak out and request help from the professor, so they can better communicate with each other.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The number of international students attending American colleges and universities continues to improve. International student enrollment nearly doubled from 2000 to 2014 (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). For example, Allen University, a historically black university, located in Columbia, South Carolina, most likely had no international students a decade ago. Today, Allen University has over 20 international students and professors. When international students decide to pursue education in the United States, they face many challenges. The challenges faced frequently by international students are language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness, discrimination, and practical problems associated with changing environments (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Kuo (2011) said that the major challenges that international students faced studying at American universities are listening, comprehension and oral proficiency. While international students have a slight understanding of English grammar, they have a particular issue with conversational English. The bigger problems international students have during classroom situations understand lectures, being a part of classroom discussions, writing papers, and taking notes. One of the reasons language proficiency is such a big issue is because the cultural background of students affects the ways they learn and communicate (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). For example, students who come from Spanish speaking countries like Mexico and Spain may speak the same language but have different cultural experiences that will influence their adjustment to studying in the United States. Universities in America are not fully prepared to support international students; they do not completely understand difficulties that international students face leaving home. All the colleges and universities in the United States require international students to meet minimum language proficiency, which includes writing and comprehension of the English language. Unfortunately, many of the international students do not have sufficient practice speaking English as it is spoken in the United States (Kuo, 2011). Furthermore, English proficiency is a great influence on cultural adjustment of international students. International students that have less English language fluency are more likely to experience acculturative distress and depressive feelings (de Araujo, 2011).

According to Mesidor & Sly (2016), international students experience the four stages of the cultural adjustment. The first stage is called the honeymoon stage. In this stage, students are excited and thrilled to start a new chapter of their life. Students will often feel accomplished because they succeeded in being accepted to study overseas. However, they might also feel conflicted within themselves because they know that they are about to experience the cultural differences. The second stage of cultural adjustment is called the hostility stage. This stage is common for students experiencing culture shock, and these students go through frustration, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, many students begin to feel unmotivated to pursue their academic goals. The humor stage is the third stage of cultural adjustment. In this stage, international students get adapted to their surroundings and they have made friends. The final stage is called the home stage. This is the stage of cultural adjustment where international students feel accepted in the new environment and they feel like they are home. I will take my experience as an example. I definitely went through the honeymoon stage, and I felt all that excitement about leaving Serbia and coming to study in America. My English proficiency was not great when I came to the United States and I struggled speaking for the first couple of months. That is when I experienced the hostility stage and the culture shock. Americans have a different way of doing things. A great example would be the food. I had a problem eating American food, or I would eat my food with different dressing than Americans and they would make fun of it. I was going through depression and I wanted to go back home. That is when I made many new friends and I started to enjoy my surroundings. Finally, I made the transition to the fourth stage and I was able to call my university a home. It is assumed that when an international student is engulfed into the lifestyle of an American, then the international student will have an easier time adjusting accordingly. International students who engage with individuals of similar ethics have a better chance of high esteem (Leong, 2015). Students from other countries find it easier to connect to individuals with similar traits to their lifestyles, which make it hard for these students to connect, on another level, with the American students. However, if the American students were more helpful within the adjustment period of these internationals, then they would not have such low self-esteem while in America.

De Araujo (2011) said that homesickness coincides with the adjustment international student's encounter throughout their experience at an American university. This is seen more for international students who came to study in America versus Americans who go abroad to study in a different country. International students in America have a higher risk of homesickness because here in the United States, citizens are less likely to open up their homes to these international students. Americans in a different country are able to gain the entire home experience of other countries.

Although academic stress is not limited to just international students, they have more added stressors due to the language anxiety than American students. Academic stress causes life stress in all the students because when there are academic stressors added to the mix, it causes more distress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students take their education very seriously and when they are underachieving, this can cause much stress in their everyday lives. After the international students fail at reaching their goals, this can cause adapting issues for these students in America. According to Pappamihel (2002), anxiety levels that appear when international students are learning English are often caused by fears from negative evaluation, test anxiety, communication apprehension, and identity creation tension. Additionally, if students experience levels of language anxiety, they tend to withdraw from studying at the university in the United States. Some of the students that are experiencing these types of anxiety feel threatened by any situation that involves the use of the English language. However, other international students find a way to overcome these situations.

Much of the literature about international students at American colleges and universities focuses on language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness, discrimination, and practical problems associated with changing environments (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Additionally, adjustment challenges mentioned in the literature are English proficiency, anxiety, cultural adjustments and homesickness (Pappamihel, 2002; Kuo, 2011; de Araujo, 2011; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). My research continues to explore how adjustment issues affect international students attending American colleges and universities.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research used qualitative method where primary data was collected. I created two surveys and conducted interviews with students and professors.

The first survey consisted of seven questions. A sample size of 20 students was selected at random at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. All the students that answered the survey had one or more classes with one of the international professors from the university. The survey was conducted in written form. Research had 100% response after the survey.

Sample questions used for the survey

1. In what ways would you communicate with your professor?
2. In what ways would you communicate with your international professor?
3. Do you find it difficult understanding your international professor?
4. At any point of the time, did the international professor need to fix a dilemma? If so, explain how you were able to correct misunderstanding?
5. After a certain time, did your communication with international professor got better?
6. Based on your opinion, what advice could you give to help improve international professor's communication skills with other students?
7. If you could not understand your international professor, would you switch the class?

The second survey consisted of six questions. A sample size of seven international students was selected at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. International students are from Nigeria, Jamaica, Liberia and Serbia. Questions were generated through Survey Monkey. I had 100% rate response after the survey.

Sample questions used for the survey

1. Where you proficient in English before you attended an American college/university for the first time?

| | | |
|-----|----|--------|
| Yes | No | Unsure |
|-----|----|--------|
2. Did you experience adjustment issues when you attended an American college/university for the first time?

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| Yes | No | Unsure |
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3. Did you experience college anxiety when you attended an American college/university for the first time?

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|-----|----|--------|
| Yes | No | Unsure |
|-----|----|--------|

4. Did you experience homesickness when you attended an American college/university for the first time?

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|-----|----|--------|
| Yes | No | Unsure |
|-----|----|--------|

5. Did you experience cultural adjustments when you attended an American college/university for the first time?

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|-----|----|--------|
| Yes | No | Unsure |
|-----|----|--------|

6. Did you experience educational difficulties when you attended an American college/university for the first time?

| | | |
|-----|----|--------|
| Yes | No | Unsure |
|-----|----|--------|

The third part of my research was conducting interviews with international professors. I scheduled four interviews with four different international professors at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. International professors are from different parts of Africa such as Nigeria and Ghana, as well from different countries such as Japan. Their interviews consisted of five questions each.

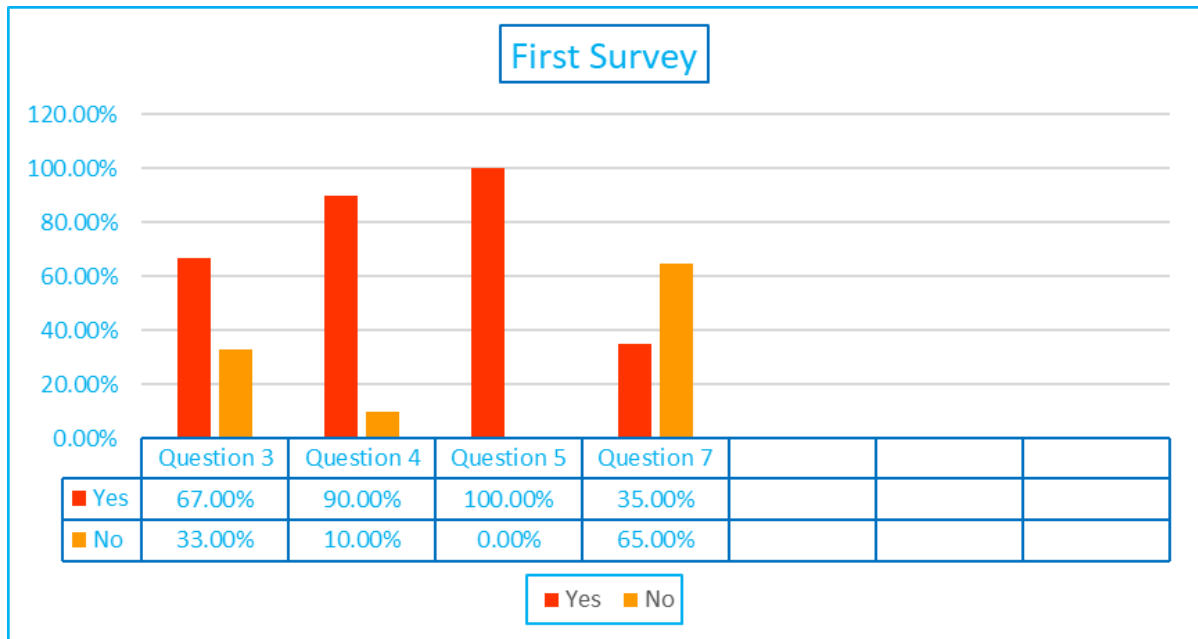
Sample questions used for the interview

1. In what ways do you communicate with your international students in and out of the classroom?
2. Do you find it difficult to communicate with your students?
3. What specific ideas do you use to help better communicate with your students?
4. Were students ever mean to you because you spoke differently?
5. Overall how would you rate your experience communicating between yourself and students?

Data analysis and interpretations

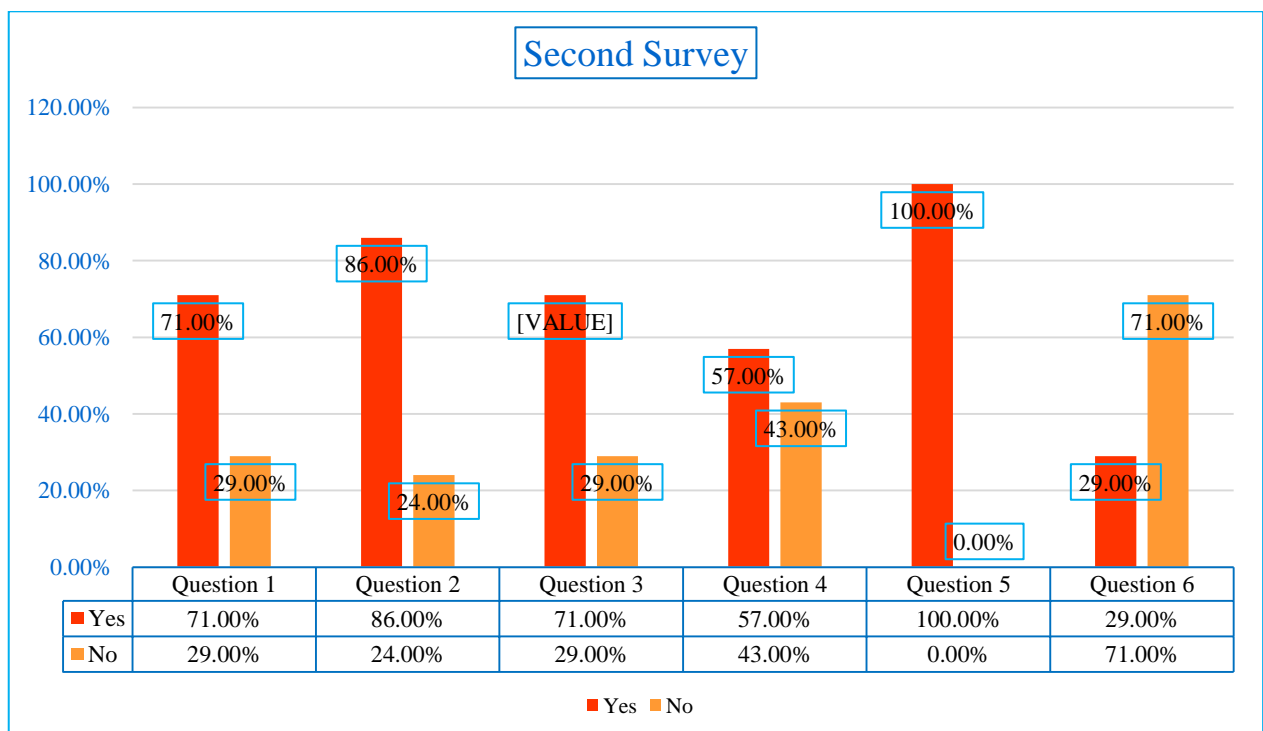
First Survey

Out of the twenty students, sampled and surveyed, 90% of the students had the same answers for the first and the second question. The purpose of the first and second question was to spot a difference in students communicating with professors that speak English as their first language and international professors that have a different accent when speaking English, since that is not their original language. Students said that they communicate with all professors' through email, but if the conversation needs to be more detailed and personal, they prefer face-to-face meetings. In addition, some of the students stated that one way of communicating with professors in the class is asking questions if they do not understand what the professor is saying. For the third question, around 67% of the students answered yes. Furthermore, some students added that it depends on how deep of an accent the international professors had. The remaining 33% of the students stated that they did not have any problem understanding international professors. Out of twenty students, 90% stated as their answer for the fourth question that they did not have any dilemma with international professors, although a few students stated that they had a miscommunication in understanding an assignment given by the international professor. This problem was resolved by going to their office in order to fully understand the assignment. However, 100% of the students answered the same on the fifth question. Students said that their conversation with international professor got better after a certain amount of time. When it comes down to the sixth question, there were different opinions and advices on how international professors could improve their communication with students. Some students suggested that international professors could speak louder, others would like to have professors write down what they want to say, use more visuals and plan more hands-on assignment. For the last question, 35% of the students said that they would switch the class if they could not understand an international professor. Students also said that they would try to talk to teacher about speaking more clearly and helping them to understand better, before switching the class.



Second Survey

Out of the seven international students, I had a 71% survey response rate showing that they were proficient in English language when they first attended American college/university, while the remaining 29% was not proficient in English language. On the second question, 86% of the seven international students answered yes and the other 14% answered question with a no answer. For question number three, 71% of the students said they experienced language anxiety, the other 29% said that they did not. 57% of the students said that they did experience homesickness when they attended American college/university, while 43% did not have this experience. Out of the seven international students sampled and surveyed, I had a 100% response rate indicating that international students experience cultural adjustment the first time attending American college/university. When it comes to educational difficulties, only 29% of the international students said that they experienced these issues when they attended an American college/university for the first time.



Interviews

The first international professor that I interviewed answered the questions as follows: he said that he uses written communication (emails) and a face-to-face approach to communicate with students. Furthermore, he prefers using emails as a formal way of communication; he does not like to give his personal number to students. The professor said there are sometimes barriers in communication; so as a result, he does find it difficult to communicate with his students in some situations. He also claimed that because of his different accent, students sometimes have a hard time understanding him. This professor also added that listening skills are very important, since we have people from different parts of the world with different accents. On the question asking if students were ever mean to him because he spoke differently, the professor said that situations like that unfortunately did occur and he assumed the reason for that was a difference in accents. In his opinion, he thinks that his communication was very good and that sometimes there were some languages barriers, but continuously talking to the students will make them develop listening skills.

The second international professor that I interviewed answered the questions as follows: the professor said that he does not like the use of emails, because he prefers face-to-face communication. He added that he does not find it difficult to communicate with his students. Furthermore, he did not think that his accent was a big problem in communication with students. If he uses proper English and proper grammar, there should not be a problem in communicating. The professor said that it does happen that students are mean to him, but this is just because they want to use his accent as excuse to not do their work. Overall, the professor thinks that he has a great communication with his students.

The third international professor that I interviewed answered the questions as follows: the professor said that he tries to establish personal relationships outside of the classroom with his students. He sometimes would take them out for a dinner or lunch; he also tries to have one-on-one communication as much as possible. In addition, most of his students have his personal phone number so they can text him if they need him. When I asked him does he find it difficult to communicate with his students, he said that it depends on the topic of the communication. Additionally, if he gives instructions for an assignment and students do not submit it on time, he feels like he did not communicate properly with his students. The professor stated that he had a bad experience at one point of time and students were mean to him, but that this was not because of his accent. He thinks that it might be because he is more a laid down professor. The professor said that at the beginning of his career, he tried much more to communicate with students in classroom, cafeteria, etc. Now he feels like he has started to lose connection with students.

The fourth international professor that I interviewed answered the questions as follows: the professor said that we should use all the digital sources we have available as much as possible for formal communication, including email and text messages. He also puts his cell phone number on the syllabus, so students can reach him easier. In addition, he said that he prefers a balance between face-to-face communication and emails, depending on student schedules. Moreover, the professor does not find it difficult to communicate with his students. He said that he expects that sometimes students do not understand him because of his accent. If students do not understand him, he would firstly slow down how he pronounces words. Furthermore, he pays attention to certain reactions on students' faces and he would love his students to tell him if they cannot understand him, so he can better explain things to them. The professor said that after explaining verbally, he would also write things down or create a PowerPoint with the information on it. When it comes to students being mean to him, he said that he has the type of the personality that he does not take those reactions personally, because his goal is to communicate. If students start acting anxious or angry, he would try to calm them down and try to explain things better. He would rate himself as having a high success when it comes to communicating with his students.

Results from the study suggest that the review above has identified five factors that have been affecting adjustment of international students. These five factors are English proficiency, college anxiety, homesickness, cultural adjustment and educational difficulties. Furthermore, results showed that these factors are affecting students differently depending on the situation. As seen in the several studies, English proficiency is a big influence on other factors, such as cultural adjustment and educational difficulties.

The purpose of the first survey was to show how students that are born in United States communicate with international professors. Most of the international professors came to America for the college or university. Even after all these years' international professors still have accents, maybe not as strong but you can hear a difference in their speaking. Being that 67% of the students said that they find communication with international professors difficult, we can see that accent has a

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deep influence on communication between American and international persons. A positive takeaway is that communication between international students and professors got better after a period, meaning that students become accustomed to their professors' accents.

The second survey showed adjustment issues that international students face. Most of the students experienced at least one issue attending an American college or university for the first time. As seen above, 86% of international students experienced adjustment issues. All seven international students experienced the cultural adjustment. In my opinion, that is expected, since every culture has different standards and values. Another fascinating thing is that 71% of the international students who did the survey did not experience educational difficulties. That could mean that their adjustment issues did not distract them from the educational goal that they have because most of the international students at Allen University are on academic scholarships, so they could not take a chance of losing that money.

Lastly, the interviews showed how international professors that were once students have adapted to adjustment issues that they once had. They still experience students being mean to them sometimes because of their accent, but they learned how to deal with it. International professors also found better ways to communicate to their students, if the case is that student does not understand what professor wants to say.

4. DISCUSSION

The major adjustment issues faced by international students in this research were English proficiency, language anxiety, homesickness, cultural adjustment and educational difficulties. Among the studies examined four articles (Pappamihiel, 2002; Kuo, 2011; de Araujo, 2011; Mesidor & Sly, 2016) assessed that English proficiency, anxiety, cultural adjustments and homesickness are adjustment challenges when it comes to international students and American colleges or university.

When English proficiency was mentioned strong findings of research showed that English proficiency influences cultural adjustment that likewise could influence anxiety and homesickness. English is not just a way to study but is also necessary for any kind of communication in the United States of America. Additionally, many researchers have argued that one of the reasons language proficiency is such a big issue is because the cultural background of students affects the ways they learn and communicate (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). The review above also mentioned that language is the most common issue that international students face. Nevertheless, to be proficient in some language you need to master four different skills. This skill set includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Each of these skills can affect cultural adjustment differently. In order to address this issue, future research should attempt to determine how significantly each of these four language skills correlates with the adjustment issues of international students.

This study includes interviews of only seven international students, and all students are enrolled at the Allen University. Given the small sample size, findings from this study are not generalizable. Findings from this study could show some specific challenges that international students face in American colleges and universities. The study may also provide directions on how these colleges and universities could support international students.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted by De Araujo (2011), homesickness is an issue international student's encounter throughout their experience at an American university.

We recommend the following to improve international student academic experience:

- The international office should orientate international students about cultural shock in their new environment
- Effort should be made to assign mentors who understand the problems of international students to offer the needed assistance
- Organize regular meetings to find out issues facing the international students and offer alternative solutions.

6. CONCLUSION

This research has discussed adjustment issues that international student's face leaving their home and coming to America to attend college or university. International students that attend American college or university for the first time will experience some type of adjustment issue. Adjustment issues involve several factors, such as English proficiency, language anxiety, homesickness, cultural adjustment or educational difficulties. Language is the most common issue for the international students. International students cannot fully understand what the professors is discussing during the class, being able to participate in classroom discussions, and comprehend what the professor wants setting due to the language barriers. Furthermore, language issues bring anxiety into the life of international student that will also influence educational difficulties. International students take their education very seriously and when they are under achieving, this can cause much stress in their everyday lives. Cultural adjustment is other big issue that international students face. From survey, that I did with seven international students we can see that only issue that all seven international students had is cultural adjustment. In addition, there are four stages of cultural adjustment that students will face. Additionally, we can see all the issues influence each other.

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