Chapter 1

Translating Success:
Academic Transition of International Students in the US

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ABSTRACT

The author in this chapter uses a combination of qualitative research approaches (participatory action research, phenomenological research and rhetorical analysis) to discuss a number of themes emerging from academic transition narratives contributed by US international students to a web-based project. Picking selected stories from the project, the author discusses the benefits of drawing on features of participatory action research for data collection and providing international students a forum for sharing their experiences—as well as using those experiences for informing research and pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

“How many of you are international students?” I asked one of my college writing classes the first day of semester a few years ago. More than a third of the twenty students raised their hands, including some who half-raised their hands, so I paused to ask what that meant. When I clarified the purpose of my question as “finding out which students did not have US-style academic writing experiences in secondary school,” students explained why they couldn’t decide whether they should call themselves “international.” One of them was born in the US but had studied high school in Korea, and another’s family migrated to the US from the Caribbean region while he was in middle school. A third student was a second or third generation Chinese-American (she didn’t know how immigrant generations are counted) and she humorously described herself as international because “everyone thinks I am one.” The most interesting case was that of a second-generation immigrant who decided to raise her hand later on: she considered herself “international” in the sense of being a global citizen.

This chapter describes a solution to the difficulty of systematically identifying and pedagogically addressing the academic challenges (as embodied in the above anecdote) of international students during
their transition to American colleges and universities. Using data from a long-term project that gathers academic transition narratives from former and current international students in the US, the chapter proposes alternative research methods and theoretical framings toward developing educational policies and practices that can account for the diversity and complexity of this student body. After briefly reviewing relevant scholarship on the subject and describing the larger study, it discusses a few major themes and patterns emerging from the narratives contributed to the research project so far.

The Context/Background and a Brief Review of Scholarship

My students’ accounts of their complex language identities highlighted that the term “international students”, being borrowed from the visa section of the international student offices, is pedagogically rather meaningless. Traditionally, international students are understood as having lower language proficiency (Kuo, 2011), being unfamiliar with terms/concepts and assumptions undergirding academic work in US higher education (Jackson, Ray, & Bybell, 2013), and new to the broader culture in which academic disciplines and professions are situated in the US (Marin, Gamba, Chun, & Organista, 2003; Padilla & Perez, 2003). In fact, I realized that I had been embracing some of those assumptions and generalizations myself when I asked the class who were international. While the above challenges may be real for some international students, the term becomes problematic from the perspective of placement (understanding where a teacher needs to start), pedagogy (what to focus on and how to teach), and educational policy at large because of the diversity of this student body. The spectrums of linguistic proficiencies and academic calibers/skills among international students are so wide (Matsuda, 2006; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008) that assumptions inherent in many educational questions we continue to ask complicate those questions.

Since international students come from a wide variety of academic backgrounds around the world to the US (see IIE, Open Doors, 2013), their academic experiences are extremely diverse as well. In some places, English is a language formal education and often a national/regional lingua franca (such as Singapore, India, and many metropolises around the world); but the academic systems are different from that of the US in most of these countries, or in different regions within them (for instance, some private English schools in India borrow content and pedagogy from the US or UK). In other places, English is a foreign language, making language a greater challenge when students from those places first enter US universities (Kuo, 2011); but the relative similarity of education systems among these places (view of knowledge, reading and writing tasks, student-teacher relationship, etc.) may alleviate the challenges faced by students during transition.

Unfortunately, especially for the sake of convenience of administration and placement (or simply for convenience of description), international students are often viewed as “English language learners.” Defining them primarily in terms of language not only over-generalizes a linguistically very diverse group (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008), it also obscures many variables of educational backgrounds, experiences, individual differences (Ying & Han, 2006), and so on. While the terms keep changing—from “foreign students” to “ESL” to “ELL” and “NNES”—even teachers continue to prioritize these students’ possible deficiencies with English language to the point of ignoring many other challenges that they may face during their academic transition into a new academic culture and system. The language-focused view fails to account for a whole host of social, disciplinary, and cultural adaptation processes (Berry, 2003; Marin, Gamba, Chun & Organista, 2003; Padilla & Perez, 2003) that students may (or may not) be going through. It does not consider the big picture of academic transition and success. And, finally, that