Over the course of the past several decades, there has been exponential growth in the number of international students that have come to the United States in order to earn college degrees (Levin, 2010; Tseng & Newton, 2002). The International Institute for Education reported in their Open Doors report (2011) a record high of 732,277 international students in this country. International students bring strong academic backgrounds, enhance cultural diversity of their respective campuses, make significant contributions to an institutions’ revenue stream, teaching, and research, and help prepare the student body for diversity they will find in their respective workplaces (Andrade, 2006; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012).

When it comes to transitioning to life on a college campus in the United States, many international students face challenges above and beyond those of the U.S. peers (Kaczmerek, Matlock Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994). These challenges include developing proficiency with the English language (Pedersen, 1991; Zhai, 2002), and adapting themselves to differing cultural expectations related to teaching, learning, classroom participation, and assessment (Ryan & Carroll, 2005). Each of these challenges influences the manner in which international students, especially those that are new, approach and adjust to learning in the United States (Abel, 2002).

English language proficiency greatly influences academic performance, the manner in which international students participate and interact in a classroom settings (Chen, 1996; Heikinhemo & Shute, 1986; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992) and whether or not international students “successfully complete their work in English-speaking learning environments” (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). While many international students come to the United States with high scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), scores on this examination are no guarantee that their English language skills will be adequate when taking notes, reading and interpreting academic journal articles, or comprehending material presented in lecture (Andrade, 2006; Cho & Bridgeman, 2012; Wan, 1999).

One strategy utilized by Chinese students to address their lack of English language proficiency is the use of silence in American classrooms (Liu, 2001). The use of silence is considered a “face-saving” strategy used by Chinese students to avoid making mistakes, such as answering a question incorrectly in front of their peers. Liu (2001) conducted a case study of two Chinese students who utilized silence as a strategy while enrolled in their courses. While silence is considered a form of respect to be extended to teachers and peers in the Chinese classrooms, instructors and students in American classrooms have interpreted the silence by Chinese students as a lack of interest, respect, engagement in the course, and independent thinking (Liu, 2001). The use of silence as a strategy by Chinese students as well as the perceptions held by American faculty and students about their silence led to miscommunication and stereotyping in the classroom. Liu (2001) recommended that (a) Chinese students learn to develop new face saving practices based on active participation strategies in the classroom and (b) that both groups (the
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Americans and Chinese) develop an understanding and empathy towards the cultural values that each holds.

In addition to addressing challenges related to English language proficiency, international students must also learn to navigate educational systems markedly different from the ones in which they came. Carroll (2005) for instance commented many international students come from learning environments where:

• Teachers tell and students listen;
• Students tutor each other outside of class and co-operate in completing work, often copying each others’ answers;
• Tasks are highly structured and teacher directed;
• There is lots of homework, tested orally in class;
• A high value is placed on knowing information and accessing it quickly but low value is placed on using information or evaluating it; and
• Personal diligence (expressed as time on homework) is the norm. (p. 31).

The grid below highlights some of the key elements found in the learning environments of international students from the countries of China and Korea prior to start of their studies in the United States. (See Table 1). These groups are highlighted because they represent two of the largest international student populations on the campus of Purdue University. Chinese and Korean societies are influenced by the Confucian teachings/traditions which focus on the importance of hierarchy in relationships, hard work, and perseverance (Lee, 2009; Louie, 2005).
When international students enter into their respective courses at universities in the United States, they find that they are expected to actively participate in classroom discussions, respond to questions posed by their faculty during class meetings, take more responsibility for their own learning, and participate in group activities, such as presentations (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Robinson, 1992; Ryan & Carroll, 2005). These new expectations for academic performance and participation may lead some international students to experience “academic culture shock” resulting from differences in “the education system, lecture style, assessment, and relationship between students and lecturers” (Li et al., 2010, p. 3). Academic culture shock often has a negative effect on student performance (Ren & Hagedorn, 2012).

Strategies of acculturation for instructors and international students that can help mediate the effects of academic culture shock (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). Carroll (2005) recommended that instructors be explicit in their expectations about their teaching methods, methods of assessment, teacher-student relationships, and expectations for academic writing. Moreover, Abel (2002) stated “effective learning by international students is modestly correlated to …learning strategies [and] study strategies” (p. 13). Abel recommended that international students implement strategies such as time management, joining study groups, and seek out professors who encourage class participation in order to enhance their chances for academic success.
References


