

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

**Academic Engagement, Social Integration, and Academic Socialization:
English as an Additional Language in Higher Education**

Rubaiyat Jabeen
Queen's University

Peiyu Wang
Queen's University

Liyong Cheng
Queen's University

Abstract

With a fast-growing population of immigrant and international students entering English-medium higher education in Canada, it is critical to understand the nature of academic experiences for these students and what contributes to their academic acculturation and post-secondary success. As such, a literature review was carried out to identify emerging themes related to students using English as an additional language in post-secondary settings. This article is based on a literature review of 87 empirical studies, conducted between 2008 and 2018, related to the academic acculturation journey of international students using English as an additional language in English medium higher education setting. Three major themes—academic engagement, academic socialization, and social integration in relation to English language ability—emerged from the literature among a multitude of influential factors. The findings of this literature review point to the importance of supporting students using English as an additional language as they navigate a new academic culture.

Introduction

Previous research on the academic acculturation and post-secondary success of international students using English as an additional language¹ within the context of higher education in English-medium universities has identified a multitude of influential factors ranging from motivation, self-efficacy, psychological and emotional adaptation, to financial obligations—to mention a few. Among these influential factors, academic engagement, social integration, and academic socialization are consistently the three major factors examined by recent empirical studies (Wang & Jabeen, 2019). With growing numbers of international students coming to Canada to study, it is important that institutions be prepared to support their academic success. In 2017 alone, international student enrolments were up 11% from the previous year (Statistics Canada, 2018). Around 500,000 international students were studying in Canada in 2017. British Columbia is one of the top destinations for international students, with about 24% of these students choosing British Columbia for their studies (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018). The themes of academic engagement, social integration, and academic

¹ Throughout this article, “international students” refers to students who are not permanent residents of the country where they are studying and who use English as an additional language.

socialization point to important considerations for Canadian, and British Columbian, post-secondary institutions who enrol international students in their programs.

This article provides a theoretical lens through which we examine emergent themes from a review of 87 empirical studies published between 2008 and 2018. Prior to discussing the factors that make up these three themes in depth, it is important to mention that the common thread embedded in these factors shows that the English language is a critical bridge that connects the three major factors. The possession of sufficiently strong English language ability is increasingly seen as critical for international students in keeping up with the academic demands and challenges associated with higher education (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012). The lack of the English language ability, consequently, negatively impacts the entire academic experience of international students (Smith & Demjanenko, 2011). The three main themes and their associated sub-themes (Figure 1) represent the interrelationship between the role of language (that is, the English language) and international students' academic experiences in higher education. Broadly, academic acculturation and post-secondary success are demonstrated through academic engagement and social integration with an overlapping theme of academic socialization. These three themes are discussed first from right to left followed by the overlapping theme of academic socialization in the middle as illustrated in Figure 1. To emphasize, these themes are discussed within the larger context of the critical role the English language played in the academic acculturation and post-secondary success of international students.

It is also important to acknowledge the diverse heterogeneous nature of international students as reviewed in the article. The international students in the research studies reviewed here are broadly from widely varied socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., geographically from regions such as Africa, East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, Europe, and South America) and speak English as an additional language. To gain admission into English-medium universities, these students are typically required to demonstrate their English language proficiency through English language proficiency test scores or by graduating from foundational English for academic purposes (EAP) language programs.

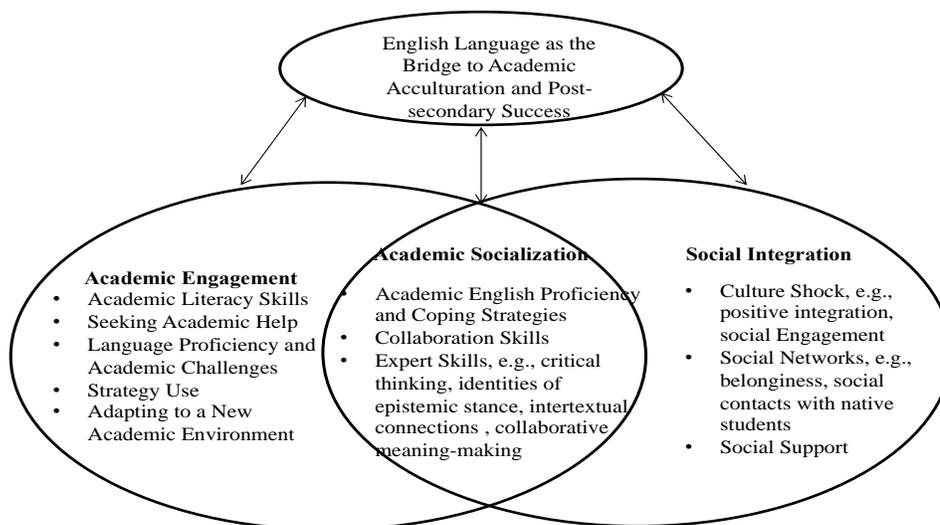


Figure 1. The Interrelationship between the role of the English Language and Academic Engagement, Academic Socialization, and Social Integration

Academic Engagement

This theme and the five sub-themes that emerged from the literature review focus on the factors impacting the academic engagement of international students in English-medium universities. The sub-themes of academic engagement include academic literacy skills, seeking academic help, language proficiency and academic challenges, strategy use, and adapting to a new academic environment as important for the academic engagement of the international students.

Academic Literacy Skills

Developing academic literacy (reading and writing) skills is critical for international students' academic success. English writing ability is a key predictor of international students' academic performance (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010). Campbell & Li (2008) researched the challenges faced by international students from Asia in an English-medium university in New Zealand and found that writing assignments, such as literature reviews, critical reviews and essays, business and field reports, research proposals, and case study analyses, were regarded as the most difficult by the participants due to their insufficient knowledge of academic writing skills. In an ethnographic study, Correa (2010) demonstrated how a student faced difficulties using her own voice in essay writing due to the lack of her knowledge of English vocabulary. As academic writing is related to academic reading, Campbell & Li (2008) pointed out how international students in their study found the assigned readings quite difficult because of the required critical thinking skills. Gebhard (2011) examined the adjustment of international students from countries in Africa and East Asia, and Poland at a university in the United States. In this study, the international students emphasized the challenges with academic reading by stating that they were expected to do too many readings with content that they struggled to follow and comprehend. However, Gebhard (2011) also found that developing reading strategies like understanding the main ideas and how authors supported those ideas was more helpful than trying to understand every word of a reading text.

Seeking Academic Help

In addition to having academic literacy skills, this review found that seeking and obtaining academic help positively impacts the academic engagement and adjustment of international students in English-medium universities. Bastien, Seifen-Adkins & Johnson (2018) examined factors impacting the academic adjustment of international students in the United States and revealed a significant correlation with students' tendency and willingness to seek academic help, such as the use of the writing centre, career services, tutors, professors' office hours, and conversation groups with American buddies. Gebhard (2011) found that study groups, where international students could seek help from domestic students, positively impacted their academic success. However, international students do not always seek the academic help they need. In most cases, international students' reluctance to reach out for academic help can be attributed to the language barrier. For example, on investigating English as an additional language students' perceptions of academic acculturation and the role of EAP instruction at three Canadian universities, Cheng & Fox (2008) showed that the majority of students in their study experienced significant levels of anxiety and shyness when seeking help from instructors and English speaking classmates due to their self-perceived limitations in language proficiency.

Campbell and Li (2008) found that in addition to communicating with instructors, the language barrier also hindered their socialization with domestic students. This implies the need for future research to investigate how academic help can be made more approachable for international students.

Language Proficiency and Academic Challenges

Similar to not being able to develop academic literacy skills and seek academic help, insufficient language proficiency also prevents international students from following lectures, grasping instructions, understanding assessment criteria and procedures, completing assignments, and taking tests (Campbell & Li, 2008). After examining the academic achievement of Canadian undergraduate students from English as an additional language learning backgrounds, Roessingh & Douglas (2012) suggested that developing levels of English language proficiency may have affected the participants' academic success in the long run. Hepworth, Littlepage, & Hancock (2018), in their exploration of factors influencing international students' academic success, indicated a significant relationship between higher academic preparedness of international students (such as higher high school GPA, higher standardized test scores, and fewer remedial courses at university) and higher academic performance.

Strategy Use

When the lack of sufficient language proficiency can be a barrier to acquiring academic literacy and reaching out for help for successful academic engagement, it becomes helpful to practice non-language skills, such as strategy use. International students with successful academic engagement and acculturation processes are usually more involved in strategy use, such as planning, time-management strategies, reading ahead to prepare for lectures, completing assignments with time for proof reading, reading selectively, taking notes, and small group discussions (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Investigating the impact of 36 English language programs in 26 English-medium Canadian universities, Fox, Cheng, & Zumbo (2014) further reinforced the positive outcome of strategy use by revealing that it has a mediating effect on the academic and social engagement of international students. Gebhard (2011) also discussed the positive effect of using strategies to manage problems that international students face in academic life. An observation and imitation strategy that involves the use of positive behaviours can facilitate academic adjustment. In Gebhard (2011), students reported using this strategy to familiarize themselves with how Americans greet each other, enter a classroom late, listen to lectures, take a turn in group discussion, and give classroom presentations.

Adapting to a New Academic Environment

To begin the process of academic engagement, it is first important for international students to adapt to their new academic environment. Unfamiliar ways of classroom interaction, academic norms, and inadequate learning support can obstruct their academic success (Campbell & Li, 2008). However, this adaptation is challenging as international students may live across two or more academic cultures and constantly compare them to their personal perspectives. According to Campbell and Li (2008), the international students in their study expected instructors to "push" them even though they understood the importance of independent learning. They enjoyed

communicative teaching approaches yet felt reluctant to participate and contribute to class discussions. They expected some amount of competition even though they enjoyed the pressure-free learning environment.

Gebhard (2011) revealed more challenges related to adapting to a new academic environment. For example, this study found that often it becomes a challenge for international students to follow professors' ideas when they tell stories about their family lives in the middle of a lecture. Many international students were not accustomed to professors diverging to personal stories during lectures. To resolve such issues, Yan and Sendall (2016) emphasized the success of First Year Experience (FYE) courses to help international students become aware of college resources, adjust better to American classrooms, and understand American culture.

Social Integration

The academic performance of international students in higher education has been well documented for the past decade. In addition to academic engagement, a range of factors has been revealed that contributes or impedes international students' academic progress, including social, psychological, cognitive, and demographic factors (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). This section focuses on the social factors, illustrated by three sub-themes that impact academic success for international students: cultural shock, social networks, and social support.

Culture Shock

When international students enter a new linguistic and cultural environment, they typically face multiple life issues and stresses, which include personal concerns such as job opportunities, visa problems, and dating issues, as well as sociocultural concerns such as homesickness, difficulties in adapting to a new culture, and instances of prejudice and discrimination (Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2012). Berry (1999) regarded this process as acculturation—“changes that take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands” (p. 13). When describing the psychological impacts on individuals, “culture shock” has been commonly used to illustrate the “process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment” (Pedersen, 1995). According to Tinto's theory of Student Departure (1975; 1993), students not only have to persist in their studies, in order to graduate, but also must participate in the student culture, both within and outside of the immediate learning environment.

Culture shock has an impact on various outcomes during such an acculturation process, and it has been remarked that loneliness and homesickness negatively impact international academic progress (Banjong, 2015). Zhou and Zhang (2014) surveyed 350 first-year international students attending a Canadian university and reported that international students commonly face challenges when integrating into a new environment, and such difficulties can be attributed to language barriers, culture shock, and distinctive academic cultural capital.

Social integration has also been considered a salient predictor of international academic success. Positive social integration such as sharing accommodation with others, participating in study associations, joining student communities and clubs, and having enough friends from the host and home countries may foster international students' social integration and facilitate

smoother academic progress (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Wilcox, Winn & Marylynn, 2005; Young et al., 2013; Zhang & Zhou, 2014). Li, Chen, & Duanmu (2010) surveyed 178 international students at universities in the United Kingdom to investigate the determinants of their academic success and revealed that social interaction with other students from their home countries was the largest predictor of the participants' academic achievement. This result is consistent with Young et al (2013), who claimed that international students' academic achievement was significantly correlated with the level of empathy (noticing when someone is in trouble), open-mindedness (being interested in other cultures), social initiative (making contacts easily), and contact with international students from other nationalities. However, contradictory conclusions have been drawn in other research (Mannan, 2007; Rienties et al., 2011; Zepke & Leach, 2005), which claimed that social integration is negatively correlated with international academic achievement. International students who have busy extra-curricular social schedules are more likely to obtain relatively low scores. Neri and Ville (2008) surveyed 173 international students at an Australia university to investigate how and to what extent they renewed their social capital and whether such investment promoted academic success. This study highlighted that many international students experienced culture shock upon arriving in the host country. Most of them actively expanded their social circle through engaging in university clubs, the university community, and undertaking paid employment. However, such social renewal did not necessarily promote academic development, and at worst, produced counter effects. This result, as the researchers explained, was due to their social circle being centred on people from their country of origin and other international students.

Social Networks

Belongingness is another factor that has been identified as directly impacting international students' academic achievement (Finley, 2018; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). International students who feel at home and who engage with their fellow students and teachers while participating in activities in and out of school are more likely to graduate (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Research has validated this view by emphasizing the importance of social networks when investigating the acculturation of international students. Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2001) reported that having a sufficient number of local students as friends reduced international students' feeling of loneliness and homesickness and increased their sense of belonging. Cheng and Fox (2008) interviewed three groups of EAP students to compare the perceived factors impacting academic acculturation and found that EAP students generally were able to make friends regardless of ethnicity, language, and culture and more likely to interact with culturally diverse classmates. However, establishing friendships with local students has commonly challenged international students (Jiao, 2006; Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005, Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Even though many international students believe that interacting with Canadian peers beyond the classroom would "enhance knowledge of one another, increase comfort in communication, and indirectly improve their classroom performance" (Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005, p. 297), international students still have difficulty interacting with their Canadian classmates, and their interaction is superficial. In this study, it seemed that international students only socialized and sought help from individuals who shared the same cultural background, which did not contribute to these students learning and gaining social experience with their host society (Jiao, 2006; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Interestingly, Montgomery, and MacDowell (2009) found that international

students can have a successful learning experience through working together and helping each other even if they do not have close social and cultural contact with local students.

Social Support

Social support could be a non-cognitive predictor of the academic performance of international students (Rienties et al., 2011; Wilcox et al., 2005), and students who receive positive support from friends, family, teachers, and peers have been shown to have better cross-cultural adaptation (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). In contrast, students who drop out of higher education often report that they received inadequate support from social networks (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Meeuwisse et al. 2010). Kelly (2010) indicated communication with friends and family through online platforms such as email, Facebook, and Skype helped to reduce international students' homesickness, but it may also have delayed the process of acculturation. Chavajay (2013) categorized social support into instructional and emotional support. Emotional support includes empathy, love, and care, whereas instructional support represents the kind of support a friend might provide in the form of a study session. International students in this study tended to gain social-emotional satisfaction when interacting with international students from other nationalities rather than domestic students, perhaps due to them sharing a common empathy for outsiders.

Academic Socialization

Combining the academic and social factors, academic discourse socialization has been crucial for international students, and this concept can be defined as the process by which newcomers "gain communicative competence, membership, and legitimacy" (Duff, 2007, p. 301) when participating in oral and written academic discourse in a community (Duff, 2010). Academic presentations and discussions provide unique opportunities for international students to be gradually apprenticed into academic discourse through communicating and negotiating with instructors and peers while preparing for, observing, performing, and reviewing academic tasks (Ho, 2011; Kobayashi, 2016; Mortia, 2000; Robinson et al., 2001; Vickers. 2007). Seloni (2012) investigated how first-year doctoral students using English as an additional language in the United States become legitimate members of the academic discourse. The results indicated that academic socialization occurs in three main spaces, such as initial contact frames (when participants first came into contact with academic knowledge), institutional academic spaces (the first core courses and the university's writing centre), and an academic culture of collaboration (students' out-of-class oral interactions with peer groups), which provide students using English as an additional language with the confidence to undertake challenging academic practices and be reflective participants in their discipline communities. For example, by enabling students to take the initiative to evaluate, appropriate, analyze, and question disciplinary expectations, the space of the academic culture of collaboration helped students enhance their engagement in the academic discourse of their doctoral program.

Academic English Proficiency and Coping Strategies

Academic English language proficiency could be a predictor of international students' adjustment, and it has been correlated with the level of confidence students have in regard to

completing their programs successfully (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Insufficient English language proficiency impacts many aspects of international students' lives, including making friends with students from English speaking backgrounds, understanding course materials, and seeking group work partners (Zhang & Zhou, 2010). In English-medium universities, the academic success of student using English as an additional language is largely assessed by their performance on multiple written and oral activities. It has been commonly recognized that class discussions and presentations cause more stress and anxiety among students using English as an additional language, and these students often have challenges speaking without sufficient preparation (Kim, 2006; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Zappa-Hollman (2007) explored the experiences of six exchange students at a Canada university and identified three major factors that influenced these students' academic socialization: linguistic factors (pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency), socio-cultural factors (unfamiliarity with academic presentation norms) and psychological factors (fear and shyness of public speaking). In addition, appropriate coping and preparation strategies like avoiding topics or content that are of little or no interest to the presenter and the rest of the class, creating speech outlines, choosing familiar topics, searching for multiple sources, or speaking at a slower speed can help students to overcome their psychological struggles.

Collaboration Skills

Collaboration skills are an integral part of international students' success in academic presentations. Kobayashi (2003) explored the collaborations among students from English and non-English speaking backgrounds when they negotiated and reached agreement about their presentation performance. His study indicated that more collaboration took place among peers outside of class before an actual presentation, and academic presentations can serve as an opportunity for both language learning/practice and academic socialization. Yang (2010) also highlighted the role of collaboration skills while examining the process and features of in-class oral presentations carried out by undergraduate students using English as an additional language and recommended incorporating the training and development of such skills in an English as an additional language curriculum.

Expert Skills

Demonstrating critical thinking, negotiating identities of epistemic stance (speaker's authority), making intertextual connections, and engaging in collaborative meaning-making can be regarded as expert skills in the oral socialization to a higher education context. Morita (2000) explored students' academic socialization related to academic presentations in a teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) program at a Canadian university and found that students had to negotiate the identities of epistemic stance and adopt many ways to show the audience they are an "expert" or "novice" during the process of creating and delivering academic presentations. Such expert identities, as Ho (2011) noted, can be constructed through critical thinking (critically reflecting on the subject matter) and making intertextual connections (referring to textbook concepts to illustrate ideas). Later, Guo, and Lin (2016) added, in addition to thinking critically and analytically, undergraduates using English as an additional language who were involved in collaborative meaning-making and were able to link self-experiences and society to the discipline concepts and theories would be more likely to stand out in group discussions.

Connecting the Dots

This literature review, based on 87 empirical studies conducted between 2008 and 2018, portrays the academic acculturation journey of international students using English as an additional language pursuing their academic studies in English-medium higher education. The review demonstrated a multitude of factors, *interactively* influencing these students' academic acculturation and post-secondary success in higher education. Three key factors—academic engagement, academic socialization, and social integration—are discussed in depth to show the interrelationships among the factors in relation to the role of English language ability. It is evident from these empirical studies that sufficient English language ability or proficiency is critical to academic acculturation and post-secondary success for these students, and English as an additional language ability plays an essential role in every aspect of their academic engagement and socialization—a core process and skill in higher education. By identifying how English as an additional language ability is essential to the process of academic engagement and socialization, this review sheds light on the need for further research examining the language needs of international students and the ways in which these needs can be addressed. Furthermore, the findings of this review have some pedagogical implications that need to be considered. English-medium post-secondary institutions, such as in Canada and British Columbia, need to provide specific and targeted support for not only English as an additional language knowledge but also the use of the language norms for academic writing, socialization, and academic socialization in English. Instructors and professors who have international students in their classes need to address both their linguistic and social needs while interacting with their classes with an increasing diverse group of students. It is important to note that those international students who experience on-going language barriers in this study have already met the language admission requirements for their academic institutions. What seems unfamiliar for them is the new academic culture and relevant language norms and use in the situated context of their academic studies. This unfamiliarity leads to communication difficulties and breakdowns, which restrict their involvement in academic engagement and socialization. The improvement of students' academic language ability can be achieved through engaging them more in teamwork and collaboration. With increased engagement, international students' identities of epistemic stance can transit from “novice” to “expert” and build more confidence in terms of classroom interaction. It is through this academic acculturation that Canadian post-secondary institutions can foster global citizenship and inclusion for all students.

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