



Non-native English speakers' experiences with academic course access in a U.S. university setting



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ABSTRACT

This study explores non-native English-speaking (NNES) students' learning experiences in a graduate course. Using qualitative methodology including interviews and focus groups, a total of five graduate student participants (four from China, one from Egypt) provided data about their experiences of learning in a graduate class at a large Southeastern university in the U.S. Data was analyzed by the two researchers from TESOL field using inter-analyst agreement in determining and applying codes to the data. Grounded theory methodology was adopted to interpret the data with no preconceived ideas about NNES students' learning experiences and to develop our own understandings of these experiences. Findings indicate that these NNES students expressed the value of learning in an American classroom with native English speaking students and Americans while also acknowledging the challenges. Internal factors (i.e. motivation) as well as external factors (i.e. encouragement or positive feedback from teachers) contribute to persistence and success of these learners. Results suggest principles of sheltered instruction are effective in a higher education setting for NNES students.

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International students on U.S. college and university campuses now comprise 5.2% of total enrolled populations and recruitment trends show promise of continued increase ([Institute of International Education, 2016](#)). With more than 4000 universities and colleges, the United States has been a popular place for international students to pursue college education ([Chow, 2011](#)). Adopted in 2006, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics) convention is to use the term "international student" when referring to students crossing borders for the specific purpose of studying. Not all international students are non-native English-speaking (NNES) students; this study focused on international NNES students.

When NNES students first arrive in a foreign country, it can be very challenging because they have to learn about basic rules for living and settling down into a new environment, and the adjustment issues of these students have been investigated in many studies ([Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004](#); [Johnson & Sandhu, 2007](#); [Khawaja & Stallman, 2011](#)). In addition to these challenges, NNES students must quickly learn to navigate an English-speaking academic environment as well. In university classrooms, NNES students may find little support among their classmates if they cannot understand each other, and although recent studies ([Campion, 2016](#); [Huang, 2017](#); [Leki, 2006](#)) have shown that teachers are aware of challenges that English learners encounter in academic study, and are making efforts to develop their knowledge and skills to assist these students to overcome the challenges, teachers' qualification and effective development activities and pedagogical practices in

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ESOL have not been identified elaborately to accommodate these students' needs in teaching and to help these students navigate academic challenges.

Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM) (1975) provided foundational research into factors that contributed to student retention in institutions of higher education, and SIM revisions (Tinto, 1975) included persistence as an outcome of students' interactions with their colleges and universities as organizations. Persistence is defined as the “desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning through degree completion” and is considered a significant factor in understanding the success or failure of NNES students (Seidman, 2005, p. 14). Persistence includes both internal and external influences and Bean and Metzner (1985) defined external factors to include the influence of family, friends and employers or professors, and their role in influencing perceptions, commitments, and preferences, and sustaining students' persistence. With these definitions in mind, we were curious about the experiences of graduate level NNES students in academic settings. The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of graduate level NNES students regarding course ease or difficulty, access of course content, supportive pedagogical practices, and internal/external factors that contribute to student success. The research questions were as follows:

- 1) What are non-native English speaking students' expressed experiences of graduate level courses?
- 2) What pedagogical practices support learning for these students?
- 3) What challenges as well as benefits do non-native English speaking students perceive in their graduate level course learning?
- 4) What internal and/or external factors contribute to these students' persistence?

1. Literature review

One assumption about graduate level NNES students is that they are highly motivated and academically accomplished, and Bifue-Ambe (2011) notes that instructors may assume that since students passed the TOEFL they are ready for academic reading and writing. These assumptions can lead to a lack of attention to the experiences of graduate level NNES students in the classroom at the university level. Indeed, Bista (2015) notes that “although international students are an important source of diversity on American college campuses, relatively little is known about their college experiences” (p. 39). Furthermore, Lee and Rice (2007) acknowledge the history of international student university enrollment, but suggest that the reasons for targeting this population for recruitment has changed over time from general “diplomacy and intercultural exchange to globalism, often with underlying economic motivations” (p. 383). Unfortunately, recruitment of international students does not ensure academic course access nor even an awareness or understanding of the academic issues faced by NNES students. The literature suggests some key categories relevant to understanding the academic experiences for NNES students. We will divide this review into the following components: NNES students' academic experiences, instructor actions that support NNES students, and internal and external factors that lead to persistence.

1.1. NNES student academic experiences

Some of the issues that NNES students confront as international students have been reported by researchers, such as marginalization, disempowering discourses, and lack of mentoring (Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein & de Oliveira, 2008; Phillipson, 1992). Many studies further reveal that there are academic challenges for NNES students at the postsecondary level such as understanding rhetorical situations or styles, writing and learning to write in their academic fields, and learning academic and technical vocabulary in their academic disciplines (Casanave, 1990, 1992, 2002; Corson, 1997; Leki, 2003; Zamel & Spack, 2004). Since limited language proficiency could generate academic difficulties and academic stress, the majority of studies stated that language proficiency was a significant predictor of these academic-related problems (e.g., Araujo, 2011; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2007). Compared with native speakers, NNES students are less likely to express themselves appropriately by rhetorical, pragmatic, or sociolinguistic means and it is also more difficult for them to establish positive relationships with peers and professors (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Morita 2004). Mismatched academic and cultural values can lead to dissatisfaction from NNES students with advising practices and NNES students often face difficulties in building a constructive relationship with their professors or academic advisors (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2009). In order to achieve their academic goals, NNES students need to become acculturated into foreign campus life and familiarize themselves with academic cultural norms, practices, and academic discourse embedded within the specific institution and academic discipline (e.g., Lee & Ciftci, 2014; Scandrett, 2011). These studies draw out the key issues of NNES students in academic settings; however, they do not identify or focus on the effective pedagogical practices that support NNES students in their graduate level course learning.

1.2. Instructor actions that support NNES students

Beliefs and values are an integral component of curriculum development and instructional methods (Yero, 2002) and research in this area has been one way to understand instructors' actions and choices. In the K–12 setting, NNES students

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