

A COMPARISON OF AMERICAN AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' LIFESTYLES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The academic and personal backgrounds of international teaching assistants (ITAs) and American freshmen were compared via a researcher-constructed questionnaire. Differences were noted in socioeconomic backgrounds, academic preparation, interpersonal attributes, and university experiences. Additionally, expectations of the ITAs differed from American students' self-reported descriptions. It was apparent that the ITAs held several misconceptions about the American students and American university classrooms that need to be addressed in orientation programs designed to prepare the ITAs to teach in American universities.

In recent years, the United States has experienced a large influx of international graduate students, particularly PhD students (Aslanbeigui & Montecinos, 1998). Graduate teaching assistants are utilized to teach undergraduate students at every major research university in the United States, and many of these teaching assistants are international students. According to Sarkodie-Mensah (1991), dependence on international teaching assistants (ITAs) is likely to increase in the future. Because the majority of the ITAs attended undergraduate school in their native countries, they are unfamiliar with both American customs and American university life and, as a result, may initially experience culture shock and severe difficulties in adapting to the new environment (DeArmond & Stevenson, 1992; Kuhn, 1996). To aid in that adaptation, Rice (1979) pointed out the moral and academic obligation of American universities to familiarize the international teaching assistants (ITAs) with the "socio-cultural and academic differences in the [American] university system that may cause a communication breakdown with the classroom" (p. 4). One of the greatest cultural differences between American and international students lies in the classroom structure (Sheehan & Pearson, 1995). In many international countries, the educational system is paternalistic and

formal, with students expected to memorize material and to accept the teachers' words with reverence (Lieberman, 1994). Students who come from such systems often find it difficult to adjust to American education, which relies more on exploration, analysis, and synthesis (Althen, 1988). Ladd and Ruby (1999) mentioned the need for international students to shift from an educational style emphasizing memorization to one valuing independent problem solving. Sheehan and Pearson thus noted the need for faculty guidance with international students whose "cultural differences" and lack of "language proficiency" (p. 527) may present problems in adjusting to the American classroom.

Previous studies have found international students to have strong academic backgrounds (Aslanbeigui & Montecinos, 1998) and to come from highly educated families (Klamer & Colander, 1990). Aslanbeigui and Montecinos reported that almost all of the international students in their study were subsidized by government funding, foundations, or teaching/research assistantships.

Because of these noted educational differences, increased attention is being granted to the task of preparing prospective teaching assistants for the classroom (Lowman & Mathie, 1993). However, ITA orientation often consists of generic manuals and general teaching assistant workshops that address interpersonal, professional, and organizational strategies for university teaching. Workshops designed specifically for the international teaching assistant often concentrate solely on language proficiency. While the ITAs need assistance with these skills and strategies, they need additional specific intercultural orientation to enable them to understand better the American students and American university life. Ross and Krider's (1992) interviews with ITAs who did not attend an orientation workshop before teaching in the American classroom revealed the respondents' desires for information about American culture and pedagogy prior to their American teaching experience.

One needed area of orientation for ITAs involves the interpersonal dimension of classroom teaching, which includes not only culture-specific knowledge and communication skills, but adaptability and self-knowledge as well (Jandt, 1995). According to Lowman and Mathie (1993), interpersonal skills impact "classroom atmosphere and student motivation" (p. 88). Moreover, as Meredith (1985) and Martin and Hammer (1989) pointed out, these interpersonal skills are also significant predictors of students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. In fact, when international teachers who were equally proficient in language skills were evaluated by American students, the students perceived the instructors with superior interpersonal skills to have superior language skills as well. Public speaking teachers have long thought that audience analysis leading to appropriate selection of vocabulary and supporting materials is one of the most significant components of informative speaking (Lucas, 1995). A recent study (Nelson, 1992) showed that the use of personal cultural examples not only positively improves student perceptions of international teaching assistants, but also enhances student recall of material. Selection of cultural material appropriate for the American undergraduate audience is problematic, however, for ITAs, whose backgrounds and expectations make effective audience analysis difficult. Therefore, orientation programs that provide specific descriptions of the personal, cultural, and educational backgrounds of American students can enable ITAs to adapt their teaching methods and materials more effectively to the American classroom. Likewise, knowledge of the backgrounds and expectations of the ITAs will assist the planners of ITA orientations in providing the necessary information to the prospective teaching assistants.

A need for a more accurate description of ITAs' home lifestyles and academic experiences as well as their perceptions of American students and universities prompted the researchers, instructors in the ITA orientation workshop at a land grant university in the southeastern United States, to conduct the present study. The purpose of this study was to compare American undergraduate students' self-reported home and university experiences to international graduate students' own self-reported experiences. Additionally, researchers sought to identify ITAs' expectations regarding American undergraduate students and university life.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Responses to a researcher-constructed questionnaire were obtained from 46 international participants during the ITA August workshop, a week-long orientation for international graduate students who seek teaching assistantships. The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the workshop when many of the prospective ITAs had just arrived in the United States. The ethnic backgrounds of the international students included the following: 23 Chinese, 21 Indian, 1 Saudi Arabian, and 1 Iranian. Subsequently, a similar questionnaire was administered to 63 American students (47 Caucasian, 16 African American) in undergraduate freshman-level composition and public speaking classes taught by the researchers during the fall semester. Both international and American students' participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was guaranteed.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire, which was designed by the researchers to aid in their classroom instruction in the ITA workshop, consisted of multiple choice, Liker-type scale, as well as fixed alternative questions. It has not been validated via psychometric measures. Both international and American respondents were asked to describe such pedagogical items as typical class size and format, assignments, methods of examination, and text utilization in their own countries. Questionnaire items related to socioeconomic and academic background, university experience, and interpersonal attributes were also included. In addition, ITAs were asked questions about their expectations relative to American students, their lifestyles, and the American classroom. An Appendix provides sample items from the questionnaire.

Results

Socioeconomic Background

As was expected, the socioeconomic backgrounds of the ITAs and the American students were different. The international students reported larger families, fewer cars per family, and smaller homes with a larger number of people living in the homes. Although home ownership was similar for both International and American families, the family incomes of the two groups were significantly different. The vast majority of international students (80%) reported annual family incomes of less than \$10,000, whereas 87% of American students reported incomes of over \$20,000 (the highest annual income listed on the survey). In terms of estimated annual income, the international students' expectations of average American incomes were consistent with American students' reports. It must be noted, however, that reported dollar amounts do not represent actual buying power in the respective countries, but do indicate significant differences in the finances available in the United States to the respective groups.

Both similarities and differences were apparent in the maternal and paternal education reported by the international and American students. The mothers of the international students had completed fewer years of formal schooling than the mothers of American students. Forty percent of international mothers had completed less than 10 years of school in contrast to only 8% of the American mothers. However, the numbers of maternal parents complete 10-12 years of formal school were almost the same for international and American mothers (24% and 22% respectively). The post-secondary maternal education of the two groups, however, again differed dramatically, as only 36% of the international mothers had attended university and/or graduate school in contrast to 70% of the American mothers. A higher percentage of international fathers had completed less than 10 years of formal education (13%) than had American fathers (8%). The reported paternal education of the two groups was similar for

secondary schooling, but, like maternal education, dissimilar for university attendance, 36% of international fathers compared to 70% of American fathers having pursued post-secondary education.

Academic Preparation and Knowledge

International students described themselves as being better prepared in math and language than American students. One hundred percent of the ITAs described themselves as well prepared in math in contrast to only 11% of American students who described themselves similarly. Interestingly, 32% of the international students expected American students to have good math preparation. Differences were also found in the perceptions of the international students and the American students in terms of their language preparation. Eighty percent of the ITAs described themselves as well prepared in language in contrast to 51% of American students who felt well prepared. Again, the ITAs overestimated American students' preparation, with 74% expecting American students to be well prepared in language. Although the ITAs overestimated the American students' preparation in both math and language, they did perceive the Americans to be less well prepared than they were themselves.

American and international students also displayed markedly different perceptions of their knowledge about geography and history. Eighty-seven percent of the international students felt well informed in both geography and history. In contrast, only 24% of American students felt well informed in geography, and only 31% described themselves as well informed in history. The ITAs perceived American students to be somewhat better informed as 37% and 44% of the internationals expected them to be knowledgeable in the areas of geography and history respectively.

One area in which there was agreement between the American and international students was sports information, with both groups reporting that they were knowledgeable about sports.

University Experience

Study routines were unexpectedly similar for American and international students. Although over 80% of both groups agreed that memorization was an important part of their study routine, only 45% of the international expected memorization to be important to the American university experience.

As expected, the ITAs reported that the university classroom structure in their own countries was formal in contrast to the majority of American students (51%) who described their university classes as informal. Only 39% of the ITAs expected informality in the American classroom, however.

Surprisingly, a larger percentage of the ITAs (76%) reported the use of humor during lectures in their own countries than did American students (43%). In contrast to the American students' reports, 87% of the international students perceived humor to be a part of the American university lecture.

Also surprising was the larger percentage (76%) of international students who expected professors in both their own countries and in the United States to know students' names compared to the small percentage (33%) of American students who expected name recognition.

The perceived responsibilities of university professors reported by the two groups differed. Only 67% of the ITAs expected professors in their native countries to hold office hours for consultation with students in contrast to 98% of the American students who expected office hours. Ninety-one percent of international students, however, did expect American professors to make themselves accessible to students during scheduled office hours.

A noteworthy difference in the university experience of the international and American students was revealed in the percentage who held jobs while attending school. Seventy-eight

percent of the American students reported having jobs in contrast to only 15% of the international students who had jobs while attending universities in their native countries.

Interpersonal Attributes

The reported friendliness of students in both international and domestic universities was similar. International students (87%) described students in their countries and in the United States (80%) as friendly. Likewise, 84% of the American students described themselves as friendly.

In terms of maturity, however, international and American students described themselves differently. Sixty-four percent of the international students felt that students in their home countries were mature compared to 39% of the American students who described themselves similarly. Fifty-nine percent of the ITAs, however, expected maturity on the part of American students.

Although American and international students responded similarly to the description “independent of parents,” the perceptions of the ITAs regarding American students’ independence differed dramatically from reality. Only 33% of the international students described university students in their countries as independent of parents, and only 37% of American students similarly regarded themselves. However 85% of the ITAs perceived the American students as independent of their parents.

Discussion

Some of the results of this study were surprising, while other results supported the findings of previous research. The international students surveyed appeared to be less affluent than the American students involved in the study. They typically reported lower annual family incomes than the American students, for example. Unlike the majority of American students, very few international reported holding jobs while attending universities in their native countries. It has been noted that most international graduate students are subsidized by their governments or by foundations (Aslanbeigui & Montecinos, 1998).

International students in the study had misconceptions regarding the independence and maturity of American students. Unlike the self-reported descriptions of the American students but consistent with previous research (Liberman, 1994), the international students expected American students to be independent of their parents. It may be that media representations of American independence and self-reliance have contributed to the internationals’ misconceptions. The ITAs seemingly perceived American students beyond the secondary level to be totally self-sufficient with no financial assistance from their parents. Moreover, they described American students as mature in contrast to the self-reported descriptions of American students. The limited sample drawn from freshman classes may have contributed to the American students’ perceptions of themselves as immature and dependent. However, since it is freshmen who will make up the majority of the ITAs’ students, ITAs should be made aware of the American students’ perceptions, as such attitudes may prove problematic in terms of their academic responsibility and classroom behavior.

Both the American and international students described American university students as poorly prepared academically. The accuracy of this perception, even among the Americans, might be questioned. Curiously, 27 of the American students surveyed were honors composition students, whose American College Test scores would indicate that they were well prepared academically. Again, media coverage of the inadequacy of the American educational system may have influenced the American students in their responses to questions regarding academic preparation. As Althen (1988) has pointed out, Americans are afforded equal access to education through secondary school. Because acceptance to a university is also less competitive among American students than among international students in their own countries, the American university classroom will likely include a wide range of student

abilities and preparation. ITAs need to be cognizant not only of the diversity within the American classroom but also of social and political reasons for the diversity. Exaggerated perceptions of the poor preparation of American students could foster arrogant and intolerant attitudes among ITAs; therefore, ITA training needs to include ways to individualize instruction to accommodate the anticipated diversity within the American classroom.

The discrepancies in parental educational levels were not surprising. As expected, a much higher percentage of American parents had attended universities than had international parents. A surprisingly equal percentage of American and international parents, however, had attended secondary school. Since the United States requires school attendance through age 16, it was anticipated that there would be a larger difference between the two groups in the percentages of parental attendance of secondary schools. However, ITAs, for the most part, represent an elite group of students within their own countries, a group more likely to have well educated parents than the general population would. In terms of actual classroom experience, although most of the results were consistent with previous research (Liberman, 1994; Sheehan & Pearson, 1995), some of the responses were surprising, particularly those of the American students. As expected, international students reported more formally structured classes and less professor accessibility than the American students. Also, consistent with previous research (Liberman, 1994; Sheehan & Pearson, 1995) was the tendency of the international students to rely on memorization as a part of their study routines. However, contrary to earlier research (Sheehan & Pearson, 1995), American students also utilized memorization extensively. A surprisingly low percentage of American students expected professors to know their names. It may be significant that all of the American students in the study were enrolled in freshman-level classes, many of which are required courses taught in large lecture sections. These classes may have, of necessity, emphasized information assimilation rather than critical thinking and class discussion. Test items may likewise have consisted of factual, short answer responses, which encourage memorization. Moreover, name recognition may have been virtually impossible in such large classes.

Limitations

Caution must be exercised in interpreting the results of this study. Since the sample was small and represented students at only one American university, it is difficult to generalize beyond the particular population of students involved in the study. The majority of international respondents were Asian or Indian students. Moreover, the American students were primarily freshmen, who were new themselves to the university experience. Their perceptions, thus, may not be typical of university students and university experiences in general. Some responses by the international students may have resulted from semantic confusion. Furthermore, since the instrument was not subjected to tests for validity or reliability, flaws in its construction may have led to inaccuracies.

Conclusion

The differences in the American students' and international students' backgrounds and perceptions of university life revealed in the study indicate a need for the inclusion of cultural content in the orientation of ITAs. ITA training directors need to be cognizant of these extreme differences, as well of ITA misconceptions about American students and the American university classroom that may cause problems in the ITAs' adjustment to American university teaching. The transmission of such cultural knowledge should enable ITAs to adapt more readily to the American classroom by developing not only a better understanding of American students, but also a better understanding of teaching techniques appropriate for their American audience. At the very least, an emphasis on both intercultural differences and similarities in ITA orientation programs should promote cross-cultural understanding and tolerance.

Further research is needed to explore gender roles and male-female relationships typical of both American and international students. Consideration should be given to how such culturally specific roles may impact the teaching and interpersonal relationship of ITAs and their students. Also needed are follow-up studies to determine the effect of cultural orientation on the teaching performance and student-teacher interaction of ITAs.

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Appendix

Sample Items from Questionnaire

Please describe your university experience.

Memorization is an important part of study. (a) yes (b) no

Class participation is encouraged

(a) yes (b) no

____ Students hold jobs during university years.

(a) yes (b) no

____ Students' questions are encouraged.

(a) yes (b) no

____ Students expected professors to know their names.

(a) yes (b) no

____ Students expect humor to be used during lectures.

(a) yes (b) no

____ Professors hold office hours for student contact.

(a) yes (b) no

Please express your opinion of American university students.

(a) Strongly Agree

(b) Agree

(c) No Opinion

(d) Disagree

(e) Strongly Disagree

____ Well prepared in math

____ Well prepared in language

____ Affluent

____ Mature

____ Independent of parents

____ Informed about geography

____ Informed about sports

____ Rude

____ Concerned about environment