Impact of International Office's Role in Teaching English in an ESL/EFL Context

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was evaluating international office services at the university level considering potential improvement for English proficiency and assimilation in the American community for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Programs provided by these offices target different cultural experiences in an American university, such as involvement in the community, engagement with peers, and exposure to campus life. Students shared their viewpoints on activities' crucial effects for language proficiency and integration into the American community. The methodology consisted of online surveys given to 12 graduate international students selected through purposive sampling. The surveys were analyzed through thematic coding. The findings demonstrate relevance of including programs organized by the international office as part of the English language program curriculum to promote academic and social growth outside the classroom.

Keywords: international students, cultural adjustment, us institution, language proficiency, international office

This paper explores the roles of different educators surrounding international students such as the international office and the faculty who understand their experiences as well as students' viewpoints. International students provide their perspectives to in-person and online cultural events organized by the international office. Research expands from Second Language Acquisition theories (Brown, 2000) to Sociocultural Theories (Donado, 2000; Kozulin, 2003). Second language learning needs opportunities for students to actively get involved with campus and community to practice the foreign language beyond their English based classes in the English language program part of the university. Therefore, students transition smoothly into the academic classes as both intercultural and social dimensions strengthen. Study abroad theories explore how international students navigate different phases as they adjust (Gaines, 2015), and they affect positive cultural adjustment on mental, psychological, and social well-being (Gaines, 2014). Given all these reasons, the collaboration between the international office and the English language program needs to be strengthened. A weak collaboration does not promote students' linguistic interaction in cultural events.

Beyond classroom interaction, students need to interact not only with international peers but also American peers. As the limited exposure to American peers and social environment persists, a partnership between the international office and English language program can assist with expanding the social context. Faculty from the English language program can include participation in cultural events as part of their learning objectives and assessments. This paper delves into the following categories drawn by peer-reviewed literature: international students' integration and culture shock, students' personal engagement, the role of language proficiency, international office as social and mental support, and faculty as academic support. Researchers

suggest a call for more English practice in social networks outside the classroom (Johnson et al., 2018; Marijuan & Sanz, 2018). Other educators emphasize exposure to authentic language, students' involvement, syllabus' internationalization, and prominence of listening and speaking skills (Carter, 2013; Glass et al., 2018; Halic et al., 2009; McFaul, 2016; Sheppard et al., 2015). The international office is the primary reference in students' assistance in the adjustment process (Briggs et al., 2017). The office also develops "buddy connections" programs between American and international students (Nilsson, 2019). Faculty should also guide international students to the American teaching style (Wilson-Forsberg, 2018). Given this precedent, the current project assists in investigating students' viewpoints toward the partnership between the international office and the English language program. By analyzing international students' experiences with programs, the paper aims to acknowledge students' experience in learning English and their engagement in cultural events to enrich linguistic and intercultural literature regarding international students.

The study explores the following questions: How do in-person versus online activities at the international office assist international students with practicing English linguistic skills in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing? How do in-person versus online activities at the international office assist international students with integrating into the American community in terms of culture, sociability, well-being, and professionalism?

Literature Review

A review of the literature included Second Language Acquisition (Brown, 2000); Zone of Proximal Development, (ZPD; Donado, 2000); and mediation (Kozulin, 2003) as they are essential to students' learning development. Considering Study Abroad theories, social networks are important in international students' learning process (Gaines, 2015; Marijuan & Sanz, 2018) as well as tutors' assistance (Gaines, 2014). Discussing culture shock, the condition in which students lose their familiar cultural references in a different place (Oberg, 1960), helps students to understand its roots. Students' biggest limitations to cultural and academic integration are language barriers (Johnson et al., 2018). The events at the international office constitute a community of practice where active linguistic skills are promoted as working towards improving students' culture shock and integration. Student organization involvement and exposure to authentic American language (Glass et al., 2018) raise personal engagement, motivation (Brown, 2000), and exposure to informal language (Carter, 2013). The attendance of social events at the international office may strengthen connections outside the classroom even if friendship still grows in the classroom (McFaul, 2016).

To increase English proficiency, listening and speaking skills should be prioritized (Sheppard et al., 2015). Language proficiency molds identity development (Halic et al., 2009), requires autonomy (Taylor, 1983), and emotional intelligence influences speaking skills (Alghorbany & Hamzah, 2020). Activities such as teletandem (online conversational program) boost communicative skills as demonstrated by Sekimoto (2019). Also, the international office embodies a place of both linguistic and communicative development (Briggs et al., 2017). Within students' matching programs in teletandem, the presence of a supervisor overseeing these programs has positive implications (Nilsson, 2019). Other times, research showed the presence of a facilitator failed to recreate authentic connections (Wilson-Forsberg, 2018). Other modalities

include the ESA system (Khoshsima & Shokri, 2016) and the cognitive method (Mohammadipour & Rashid, 2015) in deconstructing and recreating language. Informal presentations of countries may be one activity outside the classroom.

Methodology

The study aimed to evaluate the international students' perspectives, specifically how attendance at cultural events in an international office can improve language and cultural adjustment among English second language learners. The international office in which this study occurs is located in a medium size, public university in the Midwest. The following cultural events were sponsored by the university's international student's office: Culture Exchange, Sip & Chat, Language Night, Game Night, Cooking Night, Friendship Family and Cultural Connexions.

Participants were 12 graduate international students enrolled at the university for at least three months. The participants are English-proficient with diverse cultural backgrounds. English was learned either as in EFL or ESL contexts. Most of the participants participated in cultural events by the international office and they commented on them and on a future collaboration between the international office and the English language program. They were surveyed online with short closed and open-ended questions in English. The analysis was conducted through thematic coding (Saldana, 2009).

Findings

The results highlighted how speaking, writing, and listening were the most challenging skills while reading was not mentioned in the surveys. The survey indicated most participants found attending online and in-person events had a positive impact on language skills as they practice the language in communicative contexts. Integration in the American community is articulated through the following categories: learning American culture, reduction of culture shock, cross-cultural competence, personal adjustment, and authentic communication through thematic coding. Data indicated that most of the respondents acknowledged that the cultural programs in-person were beneficial to their peer and community engagement.

A few patterns emerged that reflected the beneficial effects of in-person and online events on participants' integration into the American community. The main trend highlights how learning about American culture occurs through certain events more than others. For example, the Friendship Family program, which matches an American family with an international student, strengthens familiarity with American culture more than other events such as Culture Exchange (presentation of one's country) or Cooking Night (preparing an international recipe). Based on the data analysis, respondent international students minimized culture shock when students attend such cultural events. These events also contribute to enhancement of cross-cultural competence (see for instance Moule, 2012) and personal adjustment to US, in turn contributing to developing global competence (see for instance Grotlüschen, 2018). When examining the participants' descriptions of the online events in the survey, they encountered a less engaging environment than with the in-person events.

Data indicated that students found the Culture Exchange event was the least helpful in terms of language acquisition and integration into the American community. Participants considered the Friendship Family Program as the most helpful both for language acquisition and fostering integration into the American community. Students also provided their perspectives on other cultural events included in the survey. The data showed that events that were the least attended were the Cultural Connextions program (matching an international student with an American peer), and the Sip & Chat event (immersion in the culture through music, beverages, videos, dances, and games). Participants did not strongly advocate for these two events enhancing language acquisition and integration into the American community.

Most respondents strongly agreed ESL/EFL classes should include similar cultural activities. Data suggested that more participatory engagement is encouraged: the American community should participate to more local events as well as ESL students should engage in off campus events. Other suggestions provided by the students included promoting events to the broader community in which the campus is located. A few participants stated that creating events specifically targeting international graduate students would be more relevant to their growth as suggested by thematic coding analysis. Participants' other recommendations included gradually raising the level of communication in everyday life from basic verbal exchanges to reading short stories by American authors.

Discussion

Confirming topics in the literature, participants indicated listening and speaking are simultaneously the most practiced and most challenging linguistic skills on international students' paths to assimilation into the American culture (Johnson et al., 2018). Listening and speaking simultaneously were found to be the most effective strategies for assimilation. The study results indicated participants consider in-person events more helpful than online events. In-person events boost personal confidence and self-reliance, while online meetings create mixed feelings. According to the findings, some participants think they lack active participation and reduce personal confidence; other participants believe they improved concentration. Halic et al. (2009) argue that confidence positively shapes students' identity, and the more students interact, the higher the possibility to build confidence in their communities of interaction. Surveyed students expressed international events and in-person events contribute to self-reliance. Enhancing linguistic skills outside the classroom has been explained by Sheppard et al. (2015); they identify listening as a key skill that needs to be developed while transitioning from English language program classes to daily basis communicative contexts.

Regarding the second research question, participants diverged in their opinion regarding the relevance of international events to cultivating international students' integration into the American community. According to the analytical findings, in-person events fostered integration into the American community more than online events. Based on the data, the finding illustrated that social relations and mental well-being, subsets of integration into the American community, are more effectively developed by exposure to international events. Nilsson (2019) demonstrated how the Buddy Programme (BP) improved students' overall well-being. Similarly, this study's survey findings highlighted how connection to local culture through interactions with a local family promotes mental well-being. Because the Friendship Family program evidently has a

strong impact, more efforts should be put toward expanding this program. Regarding the online version of the events to promote integration into the American community, most students would not participate in these events. Alternatively, literature highlighted the role of teletandem as an undemanding environment for international students to converse freely with American peers (Watkins, 2019). The collaboration with the English language program would include programs with mainly in-person and some limited online events.

Another concept that emerged is how sharing cultural and national identity in the events is fundamental for the integration process. From the survey, students also determined that they develop their cross-cultural skills by becoming more globalized or knowledgeable of different countries. However, this does not necessarily lead to integration into the American community according to the survey's responses. The potential project coordinated with the English language program for improving integration into the American community for international students highlights cultural understanding and global competency.

The last section of the survey elicited students' feedback related to international office events. Students suggested increasing opportunities for interaction with the local community, more international staff, and more English-based activities such as book clubs. Integrating events within the class syllabus of an English language program course was widely suggested. The study confirms McFaul's (2016) argument regarding the internationalization process of the syllabus by creating increased exposure to various cultures.

Implications for Future Research

The conclusion of this project highlights how in-person events are more beneficial than online events for enhancing linguistic skills and facilitating assimilation into the American community. The project identified how Friendship Family program provided the most opportunity for advancing participants' growth in language skills and assimilation. Future research could include exploring specific cultures within the broader international student population. This would strengthen the understanding of enhancing linguistic skills and facilitating integration into the American community by culture-specific norms, languages, and artifacts. Further research could also include a cultural-historical approach that would seek to understand how contradictions between various cultures play out in the students' learning. Moreover, a deeper ethnographical approach would also be beneficial exploring the congruities and disparities for assimilating into the American culture to better position international students for academic success.
In addition to this, a research study can also be conducted with the directors and administrators of the international office to ascertain their perspectives on the role of cultural integration and its impact on linguistic skills' success. By examining the directors and administrators' perspectives, insights could be sought regarding the programs' development, policy creation, and program adjudication.

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