English Language Development:
Preparing for a Business Career

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Abstract

Business programs in the U.S., UK, and Australia host large concentrations of globally mobile students who seek English language learning opportunities as part of their studies. This exploratory study identified factors that impacted the English language development of globally mobile students in U.S. business programs, including the level of English attained and their preparation for global employment. Students improved their English through social involvements and academic strategies, but did not always complete their studies with needed career competencies. Implications indicate a need for greater institutional awareness and innovation to ensure that globally mobile students acquire professional level English skills.

Key words: *Globally mobile students; English language development; business programs.*

Introduction

Five million students seek higher education opportunities outside their own countries and this number is rising (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016). Study destinations vary with the United States hosting the largest number of students, approximately one million, but not the largest concentration of students. Countries with the highest concentrations are: Australia (23.8%), the United Kingdom (21.1%), Canada (15.2%), New Zealand (15%), and France (12.4%). The U.S. has 5.3% (IIE, 2016).

Concentrations of globally mobile students differ within countries, institutions, and programs of study, however. Business and management attracts more international students in the U.S. than any other discipline at 20.8% (IIE, 2016). Many programs have enrollments that comprise more than 50% international students (U.S. News & World Report, 2017). The same is true in the U.K. where business is the top subject area for international students, and 37.6% of students studying business are international (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2018). In Australia, concentrations are also high—50% of international students study business and management (McGowan & Potter, 2008), 80% of enrollments in business master's degree programs are international students (MBA News, n. d.), and 60% of all business graduates are international (McGowan & Potter, 2008).

International students leave their countries with specific goals, most commonly to obtain educational and cultural experiences they would not have at home, and to establish a strong foundation for their careers. Many seek English-speaking countries as their destination with the desire to increase their proficiency (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016). This is an advantage for those studying business as English is in demand across sectors, and employers indicate they cannot find sufficient applicants with requisite English skills (Cambridge English, 2016).

Few studies have examined international students' experiences after they complete their degrees to determine the extent to which they have met their goals. Given that business is a sought-after degree for international students, this exploratory study focused on international students who spoke English as a second language (ESL) and who obtained a degree in business. The study sought to identify factors that impacted English language development, the level of English attained, and the degree to which students were prepared with the English proficiency needed for global employment.

Literature Review

Common challenges for globally mobile students include learning technologies, academic vocabulary, the rate of native speech in lectures and discussions, amounts of reading and written work, academic conventions, and expectations for critical thinking and active participation (Andrade, 2006, 2008; Ashton-Hay, Wignell, & Evans, 2015; Evans & Andrade, 2015; Ritz, 2010; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2009). In the social realm, students have difficulty making friends with domestic students and want more opportunities to interact and use English (Andrade, 2006, 2008; Ashton-Hay et al., 2015; Ritz, 2010; Russell et al., 2009). Challenges predominantly stem from the fact that students are still developing communicative competence in English, which affects their ability to effectively communicate and accomplish academic tasks (Andrade, 2006, 2008; Evans & Andrade, 2015).

Institutional Practices

Unethical practices such as admitting international students below academic standards and pressuring faculty members to pass them have resulted in the need for re-examination (Douglas, 2017; Nyland, Forbes-Hewitt, & Härtel, 2013; Watty, 2007). Schools of business, in particular, have been criticized for not adjusting their educational approaches to accommodate diverse students (Darlington, 2008; Ukpokodu, 2010; Sawir, 2011; Xia, Fan, & Zhu, 2016), and faculty feel that institutions need to implement more rigorous screening mechanisms to ensure that globally mobile students have adequate English proficiency (Andrade, Evans, & Hartshorn, in press).

Unexamined practices for admitting and supporting international students include using a single measure of English proficiency for admission, not testing productive skills, and optional support services (Andrade et al., 2014, 2015, 2016). These practices are based on a support philosophy, which stems from a deficit paradigm (e.g., students are unprepared and lacking skills) rather than a philosophy of development (e.g., students need structure and guidance to develop their skills) (Andrade et al., 2014, 2015, 2016; Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012. As a result, students may return home dissatisfied with their English proficiency and intercultural experiences (Roy et al., 2016).

Opinions regarding responsibility for English language development differ. Department heads in schools of business unequivocally agree that it is the students' responsibility and then the institution's (Andrade et al., in press). Faculty believe they have neither the responsibility nor expertise to address English language development (Andrade, 2010; Benzie, 2010; Darlington, 2008; Ingrams & Holzer, 2016; Murray, 2012; Ukpokodu, 2010). Institutions are beginning to replace ineffective generic English language programs (Ashton-Hay et al., 2015) with embedded discipline-based English language support (Ashton-Hay et al., 2012; Baik & Greig, 2009; Evans, Tindale, Cable & Hamil Mead, 2009; Frohman, 2012; Webb, 2012).

Expectations and Outcomes

Business department heads are aware of the challenges international students have navigating academic content, but expect them to be fluent, comprehend class discussions, write accurately, and interact effectively (Andrade et al., in press). They do not adjust their pedagogical approaches or actively help students develop their English skills. They indicate that expected proficiency development does not always occur because students associate primarily with those from their own linguistic backgrounds.

Few institutions track international student outcomes. Nearly 75% of public management programs do not collect data on international students' goals, 60% do not collect data on international students' experiences, and 65% do not collect information on students' future plans (Ingrams & Holzer, 2016). Approximately 50% of administrators in institutions hosting the most international students in the U.S. monitor GPAs and about 40% track retention, yet only 20% consider this a weakness (Andrade et al, 2014); similarly, most programs do not measure post-graduation outcomes for this population (Andrade et al., in press).

Administrators in institutions hosting the most international students in the U.S. believe that their globally mobile students do as well or better than others students in spite of limited data to confirm this (Andrade et al., 2014). Similarly, department heads of business programs hosting large percentages of international ESL students believe that students completing their programs demonstrate higher levels of English language proficiency than when they began, yet have only anecdotal data as evidence (Andrade et al., in press).

Employers view communication and English language proficiency as a critical, and believe these skills should receive more attention (Australian Education International, 2010; Hart Research Associates, 2015). Some evidence suggests that students' English language skills do not improve during their enrollment, and consequently, they have difficulty finding employment (Birrell, 2006; Benzie, 2010; Bretag, 2007). In sum, "students are graduating with the requisite technical skills . . . , but are unemployable because their English-language proficiency and broad cultural and social skills are judged to be inadequate by employers" (Nyland et al., p. 669).

Institutions need to carefully consider how to help students advance from the beginning level academic English skills they are admitted with to the professional English skills needed for career success (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Arkoudis et al., 2012). If one agrees that higher education is a partnership "with the goal of providing accessible yet manageable learning opportunities for a wide range of people" (Higher Education Academy, 2015, p. 4), perspectives and practices for addressing the linguistic needs of globally mobile ESL students must change. Institutions and programs of study that host these students must have clear purposes for hosting them and ensure they graduate with requisite skills.

Methods

This study focused on international student alumni from a school of business in a large, regional public university in the U.S. The institution is open admission, but business majors meet specific matriculation requirements. Enrolments in business are the highest in the university and number over 5,000, or about 19% of the total enrolment. Approximately 4.5% of business majors at the undergraduate level and 6% in the MBA program are international students.

The study met all requirements for research involving human subjects and was approved by the university's Institutional Research Board. Alumni who had graduated in the last 3 years and were not from English-dominant countries were invited by e-mail to participate in an online interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Twenty-five of the 93 students invited responded to the invitation. Students were from Kuwait, Ethiopia, Japan, Switzerland, Mongolia, Peru, Guatemala, Venezuela, Croatia, Taiwan, Korea, Ukraine, Macedonia, Mexico, and Panama. Fourteen were female and thirteen were male. Qualitative research is exploratory, and as such, is not about numbers, but rather about obtaining data that leads to greater understanding of a phenomenon (Baker & Edwards, 2012), which may result in conclusions that can be transferred to other contexts (Trochim, 2006).

Interviews focused on goals, English proficiency and development; and post-graduation experiences. Participants were asked to relay a critical incident related to English language learning or goal attainment. The study incorporated an interpretative phenomenological approach focused on understanding and interpreting the subjective experiences of participants and the meaning they give to these experiences (Smith, 1996).

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to come to a deep understanding of what participants said rather than simply describing their experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). The analysis involved trying to see the world from participants' perspectives and interpreting these perspectives while remaining true to their voices and points of view. Narratives were coded using the constant comparative method to identify topics and similarities and differences across participant narratives. This method entailed a careful analysis of each line of a transcript to determine how the ideas differed from the text that preceded and followed it as well as comparing and contrasting ideas across participant transcripts to identify commonalities and information that may be distinct (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This

involved reading and rereading the transcripts to identify quotes that seemed significant, compiling those that were similar across participants, and determining names for each set of quotes. In this way, themes were determined to coherently convey the findings.

Findings

In this section, the stories of representative participants are shared to provide an in-depth understanding of international student experiences and illustrate the themes. Direct quotations provide access to participant voices and perspectives. Pseudonyms are used to preserve participants' identity. Commentary and insights from the literature illustrate how the findings support previous research and contribute new understanding.

Motivation & Goal-Setting

Participants' goals for global mobility included English language development and degree attainment. English language acquisition had intrinsic value and was also the means to degree attainment and career success. For Aiko, English was a way to connect with others.

> I decided to go to the U.S. because the English education in Japan was more like Shakespeare and stuff like that. But that was not what I wanted. I grew up in a town close to a U.S. navy base. So, I always had a chance to interact with people from the U.S. I wanted to communicate with those people.

She identified specific educational goals: " I wanted mainly to learn two things. English and information technology for a better chance to get a better job." Her educational aspirations were derived from multiple motivations, which determined her goals.

Learning English was also a priority for Leon, originally from Croatia, but educated in Switzerland. It motivated him to be an exchange student in a U.S. high school and then continue to university. "I wanted to get my English proficiency up. I wanted to get that cultural experience. I wanted to see the U.S." With two years of high school, he was linguistically prepared for university. He said, "I went straight into normal, regular, college courses. And so my goal was to get a business degree." Even so, he recognized the difference between general and academic English.

> Well, I still had some troubles. There's a difference between speaking a language and having college classes in that language. Meaning geology or biology terms, it wasn't that easy. Because even though I knew biology pretty well, I aced it in Switzerland, it's still very different names in English. On a university level. I had to study hard.

Bataar, from Mongolia, was similarly motivated "to get a degree. That's it. Getting a degree in the U.S. is considered prestigious." After two semesters of intensive English study, he enrolled in credit-bearing courses. During the course of his studies, he felt that his English skills were "much better." He also worked in the U.S. for six months after graduation, but it was not until he returned to Mongolia and got a job that required English that his skills improved drastically:

> So for the next two or three years, that's where the most drastic change came in. Working at a higher level office, doing written or oral translations, reading I don't know how many books. All of that caused much more improvement than in the last maybe, four or five years.

Participants' goals for studying in an English-speaking country were primarily to learn English and attain a degree. Aiko and Leon had both an integrative motivation for language learning—to get to know English-speaking people and cultures—and an instrumental motivation—to learn English in order to get a degree. Bataar's motivation was primarily instrumental—to get a degree, and later, to be successful in his employment. His case also illustrates that academic English, or what is needed to pass courses and get a degree, may not be adequate for professional requirements.

These findings show how motivation impacts goal-setting and achievement, and also, language acquisition (Gardner, 1985, Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1996). Internal motivation related to language learning includes interest in the language based on attitudes and experience, evident in Aiko's and Leon's narratives; relevance (e.g., the need to socialize, learn vocabulary, translate, read); expectancy of success or failure; and outcomes or use of the language for social, academic, and professional purposes (e.g., attaining a degree).

Social Engagement

Interaction is a key element in language acquisition (Long, 1996; Swain; 1995). Learners need comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), and interaction opportunities to help them recognize gaps in their language ability and notice language errors (Schmidt, 1993; Swain, 1995). Interaction played an important role for participants. In fact, interaction through friendships and work experiences was more beneficial to language development than formal support services.

Lin, from Taiwan, struggled with her courses: "Calculus is a subject that's difficult to me because I'm not that good at math; it's more about content. Vocabulary is not a key thing because I can always look up in a dictionary." She knew support services such as math tutors in the learning center were available, but said, "I didn't really go for those kind of services. Instead I have a peer group, I have a classmate that we study together."

When questioned about who she interacted with, she said, "At the beginning, honestly mostly international students," but then she started working in a computer lab where she associated "with a lot of different people, communicated with them, and made friends." For her, the environment was "the most key factor" that helped her improve her English.

> I worked at the computer lab. And I have to talk to a lot of people. And that forced me to talk in English. When I talked, if I couldn't talk well then I'll start to think, "What should I say next time?" Then I'll go home to look for some resource to help me talk to my American colleagues at work.

Lin received academic support from her peers. Her employment situation expanded her associations with different types of people, and her interactions led to noticing of language gaps (Schmidt, 1993), which motivated her to improve.

> Leon explains his beginnings as an exchange student in high school.
> I could probably say everything from, "Hi, my name is [Leon]. I'm hungry, or hot, cold." I could interact at the very basic level. But I remember, very quickly those first few weeks, it was not enough. Somebody tells you dinner is in the oven, I thought, "Dinner's in heaven? What?" . . . . I was walking around with that yellow dictionary in my pocket looking up words.

He further commented about his experiences in high school and at university:

> I think Americans in general are very open and embracing of other cultures. And they're also very social. So, I quickly had friends and that created a support environment. And the fact that there's no Croatian or Italian around, I had no other choice. . . that accelerated the learning curve. . . . And I think no matter what the university provides, involvement and interaction is what helps the most.

For Leon, recognizing his limitations and having a need to communicate were motivating. Additionally, he was in a supportive environment and formed associations easily, leading to more interaction and involvement.

Some participants associated primarily with international students, but this did not detract from learning English. Aiko joined an international student culture club. She indicated that "mainly [her] English skill was developed just through the international students." Hans made it a goal to not just interact with other international students. "I was really active in student government and tons of other stuff as well." He advised: "For international students, I really recommend to be involved. If there's some kind of club or student government or athletics I really recommend it."

Another student, Ruben, from Venezuela, agreed: "Towards the end, I interacted with more locals. I set a goal to have friends mostly with locals. It really, really made a huge difference." Others recognized limitations in interacting with co-culturals. Bataar explained: "There was a big group of Mongolians, so I think that kind of slowed down progress. Ideally, I wish it would have been non-Mongolian community." He spent 80% of his time interacting with Mongolians and the other 20% with other international students. "With Caucasians, there were not many interactions."

Participants recognized the importance of interaction and involvement in improving their English skills. They moved outside their comfort zones and expanded their social circles. They challenged themselves by getting jobs which required them to develop their communicative competence. These interactions helped learners notice gaps in their abilities and form strategies to address these gaps.

Academic Strategies

Participants used academic strategies to develop their English proficiency. These ranged from "I kind of just worked my tail off, to be honest," to accessing linguistic input from movies, TV, and newspapers, and deliberate study of the language. A primary challenge for learners was vocabulary. Lin addressed this through input from newspapers and television.

> I figured that I could not just look up worlds in the dictionary because that's not enough to speed up my vocabulary competency. So I read the newspaper morning the evening and I read pretty much everything from news and ads, everything. And I started to spend time to watch TV. I read the captions, and I started to learn some slangs.

Ruben picked up tips from other international students:

> Honestly, I was really young and naive. So, I didn't know how to study. But with time I saw what worked and what didn't. I was around other international students. I wasn't translating words until I noticed a Chinese student. She was always with her dictionary. I thought, maybe I'm missing stuff. And I found I was missing a lot. So, I made sure that I didn't miss words that I didn't know.
> Hans found spell-check a helpful strategy for improving his writing:
> While verbally I could communicate, writing college-level papers was difficult in terms of the spelling and so forth. I would have had a lot more errors than an

average student. And that little red underline thing was great. Right-click, correct, and move along.

Leon explains how he felt when he spoke up in class:

> Every time you speak up in class, you feel like every word is being rated because you have the accent and everybody's kind of curious what you're gonna say and how you're gonna say it. So I remember being a bit tired at the end of the day feeling like I'd been on stage.

For these students, a critical incident helped them recognize the need to change. For Lin, it was recognizing that looking up words in a dictionary was insufficient; for Ruben, it was realizing that he was missing information and modelling what he saw another international student do; for Hans, it was seeing his grammar and spelling errors; and for Leon, it was the feeling of being on stage and feeling the pressure to perform well. The students self-assessed, recognized where improvements were needed, and implemented strategies that worked for them. Students did not think their professors should accommodate them by adjusting what or how they taught. They felt it was their responsibility to understand the content.

Career Transitions

The most fascinating aspect of this study, and one which has not previously been explored, is how participants used English in their careers, which entailed on-going English language development. For several, their post-graduation experiences did more to help them develop their English language skills than their university experiences.

Students admittedly did not feel, for the most part, that they had professional level English language skills upon graduation. Aiko stated: "It was very hard for me to get a job because my English wasn't sufficient." She tells about working in the U.S. before returning home:

> The worst experience I had was I arrived at the company and they assigned me to answer phone calls and redial them to internal lines. I didn't know how to use the phone system, and I didn't catch what people were saying. So, the manager came to me after 30 minutes, and said, "Go ahead and go home. It's not gonna work." I was fired.

She continues her story:

> I was scared to go to another company. I even decided to go back to Japan. But, then I had a chance to work as a warehouse clerk. I didn't have to talk to anyone. I just sorted in the warehouse. And, little by little, the manager gave me a desk. He gave me a computer. And, after nine months, when I left the company, I was in a front desk answering the phones and making invoices. You know, all the shipping stuff. I was handling it. So, I'm very thankful. And, yeah, learning from my coworkers. I was just listening at first, watching how they answered phones and how they interacted with customers.

Aiko indicated that her "English was very poor" when she graduated and that her "English skills developed a lot" through her work experience. "If I hadn't stayed and worked after I graduated I imagine that I couldn't get a job when I came back to Tokyo."

For Aiko, the critical incident of getting fired, finding a better job fit, modelling her co-workers, and being mentored by her supervisor led to enormous linguistic improvement. Once again, motivation was present in the form of a need to use the language and the

desire to improve. This was accompanied by specific strategies such as observing others.

For Bataar, "the most dramatic change" in English language development also occurred after graduation:

> I was working at a higher level office, doing written and oral translations, reading I don't know how many books. All of that actually caused much more improvement than the last maybe I don't know, four or five years. . . . So little by little, I was trying to perfect my grammar, writing, and vocabulary. Our project team kind of had to rely on me to do all of the stuff. Especially the English part.

Bataar did not have a goal to improve his English when he came to the U.S.. He associated with other Mongolian students and other international students. His goal was to obtain a prestigious degree. However, post-graduation, his motivation increased by the need for professional success, and his language learning accelerated. He described his current level of English: "I wouldn't say I'm fluent, but in terms of writing, I'm actually not worse than the average American. I'm not sure if I had much of a strong desire [to learn English] but I had strong desire to succeed in my career."

Lin wanted a degree from the U.S. because she did not pass the university entrance exams in Taiwan. Her experience in Taiwan was similar to Bataar's in terms of professional success being dependent on English skills.

> A lot of companies are looking for people with good English skill. In fact, my recent job interview, the whole interview process was in English. . . . They want to know my English proficiency, so they start to talk in English to see if I can communicate in English. . . . English proficiency is one of the key things that I got [from my education]. And I also got to see different cultures. . . my work experience has been dealing with various cultures. So that helped a lot. The time that I lived in U.S. my eyes were opened and brought a broad perspective on how people think. So I achieved my goal but on top of my goal I think I got more benefits.

Hans indicated that in business "English is just crucial. It is indispensable. Everything from the first interviews, the application, and 99% of the work." Ruben was one of 90 applicants for a position. He was in the top 10 "only because [he] spoke English, can you imagine?" Leon indicated that "English is a given – everyone must have it." Most of the heads of companies are from outside the country, and "English is the language for international connections. Everybody tends to default to that. It is the language for work." He describes his English proficiency as the result of "a quarter century of work. I still have a bit of an accent. But it's the language I use the most in my day."

Resoundingly, for these students, English was critical for global employment—from the application and interview process to cultural knowledge from living in the U.S. to translation skills. Learning English was also a long-term process: "Once you have half a dozen or so close friends and you interact with them in English, and your work is in English, and you do that for 20, 25 years," you will acquire English."

Conclusion and Practical Implications

A key takeaway from this study is that learning a language is a lifetime endeavor. The English learning journeys of these business graduates were integral to their goals for global mobility. They attained their goals and continued their journeys in the workplace. In spite of graduating from an English-medium university, students did not necessarily have the proficiency needed for their careers (AEC, 2010; Birrell, 2006; Benzie, 2010,

2011; Bretag, 2007). They did have an advantage in the job market, which led to careers requiring English, and furthered their motivation for English language development.

Students, similar to faculty members, felt that learning English was their responsibility (Andrade, 2010; Andrade et al., in press; Benzie, 2010; Darlington, 2008; Ingrams & Holzer, 2016; Murray, 2012). They recognized their needs and identified strategies to achieve their goals. They did not expect faculty members to make adjustments. However, because students are able to succeed on their own does not mean institutions should abdicate their responsibility for those they admit. The students in this study were successful in overcoming challenges through their own initiative with little institutional support. Others may not be equally successful.

Institutions must seek innovative ways to help globally mobile students accomplish their educational and career goals. They must examine their assumptions, practices, and policies, and more importantly, assess and track international students and evaluate the success of their initiatives (Andrade et al., 2014, 2015, 2016). "Careful management of the international student experience is imperative, both for individual success and for the health of the system as a whole" (Coates, 2010, p. 2).

The findings of this study represent the lived experiences of a particular group of students in a specific context, and as such, cannot be generalized. However, the findings are representative of those interviewed, presented as common themes, and provide insights for future exploration. Much remains to be done in terms of helping globally mobile ESL students prepare for and be successful in their careers. This study is particularly salient for schools of business, who overwhelmingly admit and graduate the largest numbers of international students across multiple countries.

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