I Didn't Know What to Expect: University Students' Experiences Whose Native Language is Other than English

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Abstract: Sixteen non-native English speakers enrolled at a university were queried regarding their perceptions on the influence of language in academic setting. Using survey research that included Likert-type and open-ended questions data were analyzed using descriptive, inferential, and qualitative methods. Results indicated trends in college preparedness, language confidence, and experiences in language support at the collegiate level. This data allows colleges and university instructors, administration, and students the opportunity to start the conversation around providing equity in education for linguistically diverse student populations.

Key Words: non-native English speakers, college, barriers, supports

Twenty-five percent of public-school students speak another language than English in the home and are known as non-native English speakers (Ziegler & Camarota, 2018). There is a recognized shift in student demographics as students with diverse backgrounds are now the majority of students entering public schools (Chen, 2019). For reference, a non-native speaker is a person "for whom English is a second or foreign language" (Medgyes, 2001). The changing diverse composition in public schools has resulted in population shifts of students with diverse backgrounds in higher education settings.

There are multiple policies and programs supporting the needs of K-12 students but limited supports for students in higher education (Bergey et al., 2018). Consequently, students who are non-native English speakers often find themselves struggling with college success and attrition (Murray, 2016). Once in college, students no longer are designated as ELL students, eliminating the state or federal supports once available to them in the K-12 setting (Oropeza et al., 2010). This lack of language status identification may prevent proper interventions and supports to ensure student success.

Although there has been some research on diverse populations in higher education, few studies have focused on non-native English speaking (NNES) college populations (Kanno & Cromley, 2013). Research on this topic has focused on NNES students in community colleges (Blumenthal, 2002); however, there is minimal research or even conversation surrounding the needs of non-native English speakers (NNES) at the four-year and university level (Kanno &

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Cromley, 2013). With 85%-90% of the students at a community college intending to transfer to 4-year institutions for undergraduate degree completion (Crisp & Nora, 2010), it is essential that colleges and universities are prepared to meet the needs of this diverse group of students.

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the language experiences of students who are non-native English-speaking students enrolled at a 4-year university. The study was guided by the following research question: What are non-native English-speaking students' perceptions of the influence of language while enrolled at a 4-year university?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been stated that college students do not receive the same academic supports as K-12 students (Bergey et al., 2018); therefore, the onus has been on the student to advocate for academic support. This idea that students are required to self-regulate behaviors in college classrooms led to the connection to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the theoretical framework (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Self-determination can be defined as "each person's ability to make choices and manage their own life" (Cherry, 2019, para. 1). This study explores the predisposition of students to seek support through the three key SDT framework tenets of "competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (Deci et al., 1991, p. 328).

The nationwide linguistically diverse population is expected to continue growing in the future (Ortman & Shin, 2011), which further necessitates the need to address linguistically diverse populations enrolled in higher education. With the potential for language limiting educational opportunities for NNES (Kanno & Cromley, 2013), this study aims to fill the gap in research regarding NNES experiences in higher education. This research will aid in identifying the roles of 4-year colleges, universities and the NNES students in working together to meet the needs of this linguistically diverse population. By identifying the influence of student's confidence in their language ability a conversation can begin on how the student's perceptions of how colleges can best offer supports.

Harrison and Shi (2016) derived some suggestions for instructors and NNES students from their limited exploratory case-study and this study expands on these suggestions with a broader representation of the NNES student voice. Little research has been done to identify the supports for NNES students outside of writing centers (Wang & Machado, 2015), yet the NNES students have needs that extend far beyond that of writing.

METHODOLOGY

Students were notified via course recruitment for participation in the online survey. This study surveyed 16 undergraduate students enrolled in coursework at a university in the Northwest. Study participants primary language was something other than English with home languages including Spanish (13), Arabic (2), and Russian (1).

The survey consisted of 10 Likert-type questions, four demographic questions, and two opened-ended responses. Likert-type questions were scored on a 1-4 with a score of 1 being the lowest feeling/occurrence and 4 the highest feeling/occurrence. Data were analyzed using SPSS to derive frequencies, descriptive statistics, and paired samples *t*-test.

RESULTS

Participants were surveyed on perceptions of experiences as a non-native English student in higher education. Questions focused on confidence in preparedness for college, impact of language in college coursework, instructor accommodations of language needs, and institutional resources and supports for academic success.

On the questions for the construct of college preparedness students were queried on perceptions of influences of languages on speaking, writing, and participating upon entering college. A 1-4 Likert scale indicated lower perceptions in confidence in results of student's ability to participate in college coursework ($M = 1.94, SD = 1.06$). Students indicated similar feelings of confidence in areas of writing ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.06$) and speaking of English upon entering college ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.01$).

Participants were also asked to reflect on present confidence in the areas of speaking and writing as it relates to college coursework. A 1 to 4 Likert scale indicated similar feelings of confidence in areas of writing ($M = 3.38, SD = 0.80$) and speaking of English currently in college ($M = 3.62, SD = 0.61$). A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare means of upon entering and current confidence level. Results indicated no statistical significance in either writing or speaking from upon entering to current levels of confidence.

Participants shared perceptions of the frequency language (speaking and writing) impacted their learning. Responses were gathered utilizing a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 - never, 2 – 1 day a week, 2 – 2 days a week….5 – daily). Students were asked to consider language influences upon entering and current perceptions. Results indicated similar less outcomes on the impact on learning in regard to speaking ($M = 2.38, SD = 1.58$) and writing ($M = 2.44, SD = 1.63$) upon entering the university. When compared with current perception of speaking and writing on the impact of learning, students felt language impacted learning to a lesser degree than entering college: speaking ($M = 2.25, SD = 1.57$); writing ($M = 2.13, SD = 1.45$). A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare means of impact of language on learning in both areas of speaking and writing with results indicating no statistical significance. Participants were also queried on the impact of their speaking on participation in college classes. Results indicated students that language skills had little impacted their ability to participate ($M = 1.94, SD = 1.06$).

Students were asked about the provided academic support from their professors, reported by frequency counts. Of the 16 responses, five students received supports which included written/visual supports for lectures, writing supports from the university writing center, and extra vocabulary and writing support from the instructor. All of the five students that received support had previously informed their professor they were a non-native English speaker.

Participants were also provided the opportunity to offer open-ended comments at the end of the survey. Seven participants responded to the open-ended question with four indicating English has not posed a barrier to them in college; conversely, three respondents indicated struggles posed by their non-native English-speaking status. For example, one student stated that they got lost in the unfamiliar vocabulary presented by their professors and another expressed the struggle with articulating clearly, as sounds get mixed up, causing confusion to listeners. One comment revealed how non-native English backgrounds can pose barriers to success, as the student explained how they were unable to pass a programmatic entrance exam because "writing in English is harder and I didn't know what to expect."

DISCUSSION

This insight gleaned from this study revealed the perceptions of university NNES students from the Northwest. One interesting insight included student reluctance to share their non-native English status with their professors. Although eight students did share their status with at least a few teachers, fifty percent of the students have never disclosed their linguistic backgrounds. With results indicting a moderate confidence in their language abilities, students may not feel the need to identify themselves as a non-native English student, even when they might need support.

This study also highlighted students gaining confidence in their language skills during their college experience. This gaining of confidence was viewed in results that learning was less impacted by language after entering college. This speaks to students increasing feelings of confidence and their ability to self-regulate to advocate for their own needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002). A highlight of the study was that five of the participants who did share their non-native English status with at least a few professors, received specific supports related to language barriers in their coursework.

IMPLICATIONS

This study not only provided personal student perception, but also highlighted specific NNES student academic needs that universities could include for faculty training and offering of support. It is apparent that students believe they have adequate command of the additional language required for success at the university level, but it was also apparent that the linguistic differences are impacting their learning. Research needs to delve into the topic of the source of hesitancy to self-advocate for those who indicated a stronger desire for support but did not receive them.

CONCLUSION

With the projection of an increasingly linguistically diverse population, universities are going to have to prepare to meet the unique needs of NNES students. This starts with first having an effective identification system in place similar to K-12 organizations. This group of students, who may have been marginalized in past schooling experience may retain feelings of inability to either know when and/or how to ask for supports. In building an inclusive university community, all students must feel safe and secure in the classroom.

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