Teaching an International Classroom: 
Preliminary Study and Analysis

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Abstract
This study examines the challenges of a much overlooked teaching and training challenge – that of using metaphors and analogies to teach students in an international classroom. In an increasingly global world, this is a challenge that both educators and HR trainers are facing. In a homogenous, domestic classroom, the norms of using culturally appropriate and well-known stories and metaphors has been a frequently used method. In a global classroom, those same pedagogical tools have to be re-evaluated. Through the use of open ended questionnaires and focus group interviews this study looks at the challenges that international students face while trying to comprehend metaphors, analogies and examples as teaching aids and provides suggestions for instructors to improve their content delivery for such students without compromising on their use of these pedagogical tools.

Key Words: multicultural learning, cultural norms, multi-lingual students
1. Introduction

Teaching international students in a traditional classroom is a challenge (Ryland, 1992; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). Using metaphors and examples in classroom instruction is commonplace (Garner, 2005; Mantooth, 2010). However most international students are lost since the examples, analogies and metaphors are all culturally derived, and international students cannot necessarily relate to them. As an example, while explaining complementary and substitutive concepts, an instructor in a U.S. classroom used the example of peanut butter and jelly. The instructor explained to a perplexed group of international students that PB and J are complementary! According to one of these students,

“In our cultures butter and jam (or jellies) are substitutes and are never eaten together and thus international students could only think of them as substitutes not complementary”.

Or for another example an Organizational Behavior instructor in a Canadian classroom used dating rules as an analogy for navigating a job interview, however Asian and Arabic students expressed that they were unable to understand these examples since dating norms are different in those cultures.

Using results from a preliminary and exploratory study conducted on international students in a north American university enrolled in Organizational Behavior classes, and follow up focus group interviews, this paper strives to explore the challenges of using metaphors, analogies, and examples as pedagogical tools in a culturally diverse classroom and provides insights that can help instructors clarify concepts and material for international students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 International Students in the U.S

International students have been a great source of capital for most countries (Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007). In the U.S. alone, they brought about $24 billion in revenue during the year 2012-2013 according to a U.S. report, and were responsible for the creation of 313,000 jobs (NAFSA, 2013). There has been a steady trend of job and economic growth in the U.S. economy due to international students in U.S. universities (NAFSA, 2009, 2011, 2013). American universities have seen a steady increase in international student enrollment in the last half century, with the majority of these students being in the field of Business Administration (Porter & Belkin, 2013; Tompson & Tompson, 1996). International students in a traditional American campus bring with them unique contributions that range from increasing revenue for schools and states, to increasing diversity on campuses and in the classrooms as well as bringing a global perspective (NAFSA, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2013; Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999). Although the benefits of increased revenue cannot be debated, the increasing diversity brings with it not only benefits but also challenges that many campuses and instructors
may not be prepared for (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Tompson & Tompson, 1996; Trice, 2003). Some examples are increased classroom cultural heterogeneity resulting in decreased instructional effectiveness; struggle of many non-native English speakers to understand classroom instruction and reading material, thereby also decreasing teaching effectiveness; reluctance or inability of many international students to participate in classroom discussions or ask for clarifications; and finally the inability of many international students to understand examples based on cultural norms in America, metaphors and analogies instructors may use to explain material and concepts, etc. (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Trice, 2003).

Given the increasing enrollment of international students and the problems that it brings, there is a need to understand their unique pedagogical and academic needs so as to improve teaching effectiveness. Academic stress experienced by international students is significantly affected by the perceived cultural distance that they feel (Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992). Cultural distance is conceptualized here as the extent to which an individual’s home culture differs from the host culture (Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980; Wan, et al., 1992). Inability to comprehend classroom instruction due to cultural distance can exacerbate this academic stress, in turn, affecting students’ academic achievement since it would strain the individual’s cognitive resources pulling them away from academic pursuits (Friedel et al., 2014; Linden, Keijser, Eling, & Schaijk, 2005; Mendl, 1999). Thus, work that identifies specific cultural distances in the classroom and strategies to improve academic comprehension are extremely important. However, literature is scant in this regard. Previous bodies of literature on issues of challenges faced by international students in American universities (both inside and outside the classroom), agree across the board that there are unique problems and recurring trends. Sarkodie-Mensah (1998) provide an insight into the unique challenges faced by international students during acculturation and also provide some solutions. Similarly, a study by Thompson and Thompson (1996) takes the faculty perspective on teaching international students and examines student coping strategies and motivations for the particular behaviors.

These papers, among others, form the bulk of research that either only takes into account faculty perceptions (Tompson & Tompson, 1996; Trice, 2003), or examines student perceptions only from a third person account, or at the very best only looks at the students’ perspectives for a limited range of behaviors that have been deemed important by the faculty’s perspectives. There is a marked lack of insight based on student perspective, and a very telling absence of first person accounts of challenges faced by these international students in their American classrooms. Moreover, almost all studies group international students collectively (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Tompson & Tompson, 1996), unable to tease apart differences within international student communities borne out of their different cultural and national affiliations. As one paper stresses (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004), “students from Asian countries experience more acculturative stress compared with other subgroups…” there is a need to
follow-up with this observation and find both the parameters and other differences. As such, this study aims to provide a preliminary effort at extracting student perspectives and also identify differences in perceptions borne out of national and cultural affiliations.

2.2 Cultural Differences

According to Sarkodie-Mensah (1998), “Americans have a reputation for making the least effort to understand how non-Americans speak.” “Their (international students) linguistic skills, or perceived inefficiencies by their fellow American classmates and instructors might create a chain of negative emotions: frustration, disappointment, confusion, loss of self-confidence, and anger,” none of which would help the students succeed in the classroom (Lee, 2010; Wan, et al., 1992; Weinstein, et al., 2004; Zhou, et al., 2008).

Sarkodie-Mensah (1998) indicates that many international students come from cultures where professors hold the highest place in society and thus the word of the professor, in such cultures, is also treated as infallible. Consequently, the students struggle to engage in a discourse during classroom instruction with their professor. The author also explains that since typically perceived American behaviors such as informality between students and professors, and challenging of ideas presented in the class would be unacceptable in their home cultures, international students find it hard to violate these beliefs to fully participate in classroom discussions. Add a linguistic and accent barrier to that, and you have a student who (perhaps might well be extremely intelligent and hardworking) is unable to participate in their own learning due to cultural differences (Jungyin, 2013).

3. Methodology

3.1 Study 1: Exploratory Survey

The first study was an exploratory study intended to collect an account of first person perspectives on the challenges faced by international students in U.S. classrooms. International undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in various sections of an Organizational Behavior classroom in a major university in the southeastern United States were invited to participate in this study. An online survey comprising of 31 questions, mostly open ended, was sent via email invitations. With a 60% response rate, the final sample size was 28 respondents. The average age of the respondents was 25.81 years, 59% of the respondents were male and 66% of the respondents were graduate students. The national affiliations of the respondents were as follows: 36% Chinese, 25% Arabian, 11% Japanese, 11% African (Tanzanian, South African), 6% South East Asian, 11% other (Serbia, Russia, Fiji).

The average time that the students had spent in the U.S. was 2.63 years, and the average number of years that they had spent in their university was 2.12 years. Only one student was concurrently enrolled in an ESL (English as a second language) class, and 81% of the students lived alone in the U.S. (i.e. without their family).
The survey questionnaire included questions on demographics, English proficiency, reasons for choosing to come to the U.S. for higher education, perceptions of faculty in their home country and in the U.S., and comparisons of the home and host country on classroom instruction, pedagogy, and assessments.

3.1.1 Results and Discussion

This was an exploratory study, aimed at an initial view into a previously uninvestigated topic, and thus descriptive statistics were primarily used in the analysis of the data. Results indicated that average self-reported English proficiency (1=lowest, 3=fluent) was 2.48. However, the highly ungrammatical, and occasionally nearly incomprehensible, student responses to the questionnaire told a dramatically different story. This indicates a clear incongruence in self-perceived linguistic proficiency and actual proficiency, which might pose problems for many international students in U.S. classrooms.

Reasons for coming to the U.S.

The students indicated that the top reasons for coming to the U.S. were better education (50% of the responses), international experience (30%), improve English skills\(^1\), challenge self (18%), and finally, cultural diversity (14%).

Professors in the home country

Roughly a third of the respondents indicated that they liked that the faculty in their home country were helpful, friendly and approachable. A quarter of the students felt that their host country professors are more knowledgeable. Chinese students, as a group, felt that their professors at home are extremely knowledgeable. They also perceived the faculty in their home country as corrupt and unprofessional. Japanese students, as a group, felt that their professors are slackers and the only way to do well, as a student in Japan, is to “suck up to them”.

Professors in the host country (U.S.)

Half the respondents in the sample indicated that they perceived professors in the U.S. as helpful, friendly and relaxed, however, there were no clear patterns on what the international students disliked about their U.S. professors.

Comparing Home and Host Country

Classroom Design

A third of the respondents felt there is more participation in the U.S. classrooms. A quarter felt that class attendance is more beneficial in the U.S. as compared to the host country due to more in-class activities and assignments throughout the year. There was a surprising contrasting pattern of perception on the ease of scholastic challenge. More than half the respondents felt

\(^1\) 18% - Saudi Arabian and Japanese students indicated that to be successful in their country they need to be fluent in English
that U.S. classes are not challenging and demanding enough, however, Saudi Arabian students, as a group, felt that the U.S. classes are too demanding and difficult to keep up with.

Grading and exams

Forty eight percent of the respondents perceived the grading system in the U.S. as similar to their home country while 30% felt it is easier. Thus, no discernable cultural patterns could be detected. Seventy percent felt that their grades are representative of their understanding of the course material. 65% felt that more multiple choice questions are used in exams in the U.S. than in their home country and more than half of the respondents felt that the exams are more frequent (number of exams per year and per semester) in the U.S. More than half the respondents felt that American professors more clearly inform students about what is going to be on the exam and present that material in class more frequently than their home country professors. Finally 42% felt that the exams in the U.S. are shorter and 35% felt that they are the same length as their home country.

Suggestions on what Professors can do to help

Most respondents declined to answer this open ended item. Only a few respondents provided suggestions. The top suggestions included: communicating and explaining more clearly, being considerate of international students’ needs and finally giving more international examples and issues in the classroom and not just American examples since the students could not understand or relate to those.

The results of this study prompted us to explore the last suggestion in depth and thus we decided to conduct a focus group interview.

3.2 Study 2: Focus Group interview

A follow-up focus group interview was conducted to further explore the problems that international students face in the classroom during the use of examples and metaphors. Since the emphasis of this focus group was on a subset of the responses acquired during the first survey study, a group of students was selected from the same sample (who were sent the invitation in study 1) to participate. The focus group comprised of eight participants who responded to the invitation (out of the twelve who were invited). Two Chinese, one Japanese, one Saudi Arabian, one Indian, one Sri Lankan, and two American students comprised this group. The students were asked to provide anecdotes on personal experiences when they struggled during classroom instruction due to a metaphor, analogy, or example usage.

3.2.1 Result and Discussion

The student responses are provided and organized according to the themes that emerged spontaneously (verbatim student comments are italicized):

Sports culture:

Saudi and Chinese students: Football analogies like the ‘touchdown’ are incomprehensible;
Japanese students: Football is not popular in Japan. We had to do an assignment on ‘Razerbacks’ and I did not know what to do. I did not understand the game.

Everyday concepts that might be commonplace in American English but are not so common in English for other cultures. For e.g. ‘dry county’. Chinese students perceived this to mean lack of rain or drought, not a prohibition on drinking. Even after being provided an explanation, the concept of being forbidden to drink at certain places was foreign to them.

In China you can drink anywhere. I thought it was about milk or if you can raise cows. “...I thought it was like dry weather all the time!”

We do not pay taxes in our country, so at first I couldn’t even understand what the teacher was talking about! (Saudi student).

Lack of brand recognition:

Saudi students on the other hand come from a country where drinking is prohibited so some of them did not recognize names and examples such as Budweiser.

The professor made a joke about Budweiser and I did not understand it! I had to go home and Google it, but by then I could not remember his joke.

Chinese students did not understand what Marlboro smokes were. I did not know cigarette brands.

The students unanimously commented, “We don’t know what Dr. Pepper is but the professor kept talking about how this company is copying Dr. Pepper’s formula!” Coca Cola and Pepsi are international brands, whereas Dr. Pepper is a more American brand.

Walmart example works because we have that in China/Saudi Arabia, but not Chillis or Hooters.

When teachers talk about ‘the McDonalds case”, we don’t know what they are talking about.

All the students expressed inability to understand the word ‘redneck’, to the point that the interviewer had to explain the word during the focus group.

Funeral practices:

Saudi student: I do not understand what funeral homes are. We had to do an assignment about a business plan for a funeral home, and I did not understand it. We don’t have them in UAE.

Chinese: I know what funeral homes are, but I did not understand why American people party at a funeral. I mean aren’t you supposed to be sad. So I did not have that in my business plan for that class, and the professor took away points and did not explain why the party/wake thing is important.

Chinese, Sri Lankan, and Indian students expressed similar sentiments (quotation From Chinese student)

Teacher asked us to write our tombstone engraving. How you write it? Always someone else
write it for you! I do not understand.

Indian student: In my culture you do not talk about death, it is a bad sign and so it was a very difficult assignment for me. It scared me.

Interestingly the American students expressed the sentiment too and it seemed that the instructor did not explain the purpose and the context behind assigning the particular exercise, thus in this particular case, it may very well have been an inability of the instructor to give clear instructions. Despite these limitations, this instance clearly exemplifies the stark difficulties international students might encounter during successful completion of a course owing to cultural differences.

Vocabulary differences:
In American English the word “gasoline” is used instead of “petrol” (in Sri Lanka and India it is called “petrol”).

Dismissive behavior of professors can be discouraging:

Chinese student: One time I asked a professor, “Sorry, could you explain that again?” He said, “That is ok it is an American example, you won’t understand.” This student expressed that this dismissive behavior discouraged him from ever asking clarification on another issue again.

Idioms and proverbs do not translate. Most of the students in the focus group expressed inability to understand idioms and proverbs that seemed to be uniquely American and were not translated. Some examples given by the students were, “You’re going for the home stretch...” or “They should have put their money where their mouth is...”

What does work (in the students’ own words):

Bringing my dictionary to class.

Googling words right then, one teacher allowed me to take my iPad, and whenever she was talking I would Google a new word or company name and I enjoyed and understood that class so much (Saudi Student).

Maybe if teacher provides written instructions or write new names on the board that helps because their accents make it hard for us to understand. (Chinese, Saudi and Sri Lankan student).

Feedback on other linguistic differences that the students reported struggling with:

Chinese: People say What’s up instead of How are you?
Playing hoops instead of basketball

Saudi student: Law class was more difficult.
We do not understand American politics.
4. Application to the Classroom

Is it the instructor’s responsibility to teach international students about the host culture? We are not making this argument. However, in order for the students to get the maximum benefit from a class, it is important that they understand not only the content but also the stories, examples and metaphors that an instructor uses to aide clarification of material. It is, however, counterproductive when a fabulously delivered classroom instruction falls flat and becomes ineffective because the instructor and the students had a wall of cultural morass between them. As such, providing international students with opportunities to learn about, and to familiarize themselves with, American (the host) culture during and after classroom instruction would be extremely beneficial.

For eg., we have found something as simple as giving a reasonable reading list to students with the syllabus and pointing to it as a means of learning and understanding American Business and culture to be useful. We do want to add the caveat that there is no dearth of such reading material available on the Internet; however, the authenticity of the information provided in such outlets can be suspect. Thus we strongly encourage the instructors to peruse the material and make their own reading lists for the students, thereby ensuring that the students are exposed to the correct information. At other times, allowing students to bring their tablets or electronic dictionaries in order to check concepts and metaphors on the Internet while the instructor is telling the story were helpful. If an instructor is hesitant to allow the use of the Internet in the classroom, an optional remedy is to pull up the website of the company or the case that is being narrated and give some background information for students. This not only ensures some context, it also ensures that the students are able to take notes on the name of the company or product. An additional benefit of doing so is that there is no compromise on the accuracy of information conveyed due to difficulty in understanding different accents.

Poyrazli et al.’s (2004) study finds that non-American students who interacted with American students, and/or with both American and non-American students reported less acculturative stress than did students who only interacted with other non-American students. At the same time, their study also showed how Asian students showed more acculturative stress than did Western European international students, a phenomenon attributed to the similarities between Western European and American cultures, as compared to Asian and American cultures. These two results from the study indicate that interaction between international and domestic American students would be beneficial not only to decrease stress, but also accelerate the acculturative process. A student who has been acculturated (assimilated into the host culture) would be able to understand significantly more metaphors, analogies and examples used in an American classroom, than the average international student. Thus, instructors could use this information when forming groups for projects and in class exercises. However, this
information coupled with Sarkodie-Mensah’s (1998) observation that American students are less likely to make an effort, necessitates the instructor to prime the group to help the international student by overtly explaining examples and colloquialisms.

Another technique that can aid an instructor by deflecting some of the work to the off-classroom time is providing assimilation assignments. We have often provided international students with a list of popular American fiction and movies that relate to management. They are then asked to watch those movies and discuss them either with their American classmates or bring the movie synopsis to the classroom or discuss with the instructor. This approach has been found to be helpful for the students especially in the comprehension of analogies and metaphors.

Finally, bringing in international examples has been found to be helpful not only to the international students, but also for domestic students. In an increasingly global world, narratives of stories and examples that are international in nature provide students with an opportunity to learn from a global perspective, irrespective of the subject area.

5. Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations of this study that restrict the generalization of our results. The biggest limitation that this study faces is the narrow sample size. Additionally, data could only be collected from two sections of the same class. As a result there were not enough respondents from the various cultures and countries to provide a clearer and more representative picture of the differences and problems faced by these students. Our study also had a mix of graduate and undergraduate students, which decreased our ability to tease apart the differences, if any, experienced by the different student populations. Finally, our study had a predominance of Chinese and Saudi students. However, this is consistent with previous studies showing similar patterns for predominance of Chinese students (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008).

In light of the limitations our study faces, future studies would benefit from sampling from a wide array of classes, levels and institutions. Furthermore, utilization of more focus groups from first year immigrating students and those who have lived in the U.S. for only a short period of time might provide a stronger picture of the acculturative stresses faced. Longitudinal studies that follow these international students throughout their academic career to tease apart the process of cultural adaptation and the techniques that are most helpful would shed light on how to best improve classroom instruction to help international students.

This research is useful not only for academic instruction, but also for training, especially soft skills training needs in an international group of trainees. As such there is a need to expand the study to include a sample of the population from training workshops in the arenas of training and employee development.
Finally, most of the data and results are anecdotal and first hand accounts. Thus they need to be tested and measured to better generalization.

6. Conclusion

Our study is an initial attempt at looking at the important question regarding the struggles that international students in management face due to cultural dissimilarities when stories, metaphors and examples are used to aid instruction and how faculty can alleviate those problems. There is a dearth of literature both on the topic of metaphors and examples as pedagogical tools in a diverse classroom, and also on the literature that teases apart the broad group of international students (for e.g., Asians and Europeans instead of identifying the exact countries). Thus, despite the limitations, our study aimed at addressing both these issues. It is our hope that this paper can serve both as a roadmap for instructors dealing with an increasingly international population in their classrooms, and for future researchers who might strive to delve into the topic of investigating the role of cultural differences in classroom instructions.

References


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