ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A SECOND LANGUAGE AFFECTING INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS GETTING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN MASTER'S DEGREE

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Introduction

In recent years, the number of international students gaining admission to American schools has dwindled significantly. Research indicates that the decrease in the rate of admission for these students is coming at a time when scholars have identified linguistic differences as the main challenges facing the most international students. International students struggle to obtain high academic grades, particularly when they do not have a good mastery of the English language. Past academic studies provide inconsistent results regarding the link between English language proficiency and the overall academic performance of the international students. The current study focuses on the perceptions of the international students concerning the

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importance of gaining English proficiency on their academic development and achievement. The students immersed in three programs including reading, interactions with native learners, and joining the American community. English is the language of choice in the three programs. The study uses a descriptive research design to gather data, analyze responses, and interpret the findings. Hence, this paper provides insight into how international students can manage to eliminate the academic barriers created by the English language when used as a second language.

Purpose Statement

Most international students know little about English because it is not their native dialect. As such, Dehaas (2013) suggests that the international students must work ten-times as compared to the native-speakers to gain the ability to articulate logical arguments using the second language. In simpler terms, the international students must put more effort into their academic studies than their native speaking peers must gain an acceptable level of second language mastery. Courses in the international schools offered using dominant languages like English. Therefore, students must gain the ability to read, write, and understand the dominant language to excel in their courses. Currently, only a few studies show how students can gain proficiency in English. Therefore, the current paper offers a deep analysis of the

strategies capable of helping the international students attain their goals by promoting English language proficiency.

Research Rationale

The researcher hopes to find results depicting a clear association between English language proficiency and improvement in the academic performance of the international students. In particular, the researcher hopes that the research results will connect extensive reading, collaborative studying with native students, and active participation in activities controlled by the American community to improved academic performance. A descriptive research design will be used to conduct a survey to determine the effectiveness of these strategies in the academic lives of the international students.

Descriptive research design is preferable because it allows the researcher to observe and engage the subjects in a natural setting without introducing changes that could affect their responses. The need for the current study stems from the gap in research, where scholars are yet to prove whether the use of integrative and instrumental motivation can propel an international student to master a native language, adapt to the native culture, and enhance his or her academic performance.

Action Hypothesis

H1: Reading more has a significant positive relationship with the academic performance of international students.

H2: Studying with native students regularly has a significant positive relationship with the academic performance of international students.

H3: Regular interactions with the American community have a significant positive impact on academic achievement of international students.

H4: A combination of H1, H2, and H3 can trigger an improvement in academic performance of these students.

Literature Review

Over the years, many scholars have conducted numerous studies to determine the social adjustment challenges that foreign students face when they join institutions of learning in other countries. In most cases, these studies identify language as a key barrier towards social adjustment to the new environment. Proficiency in the English language inhibits the ability of the international students to become core members of the campus society and the neighborhood. Another key challenge manifests itself in the form of cultural differences between the international students and the native learners because

both groups brought up in environments using diverse social constructs.

However, past studies provide inconclusive findings of the impact of English language proficiency on the academic performance or rather achievement of the international learners. These studies have failed because of several distinctive limitations. Firstly, the scholars have been using standardized tests to gauge the performance of students. These tests are ineffective when dealing with students using English as a second language because they leave no room for the acknowledgment of limited English proficiency and its effect in the academic performance of the international students (Collier, 1992). For instance, most standardized tests tend to measure reading and writing skills while neglecting the speaking and listening skills.

Secondly, past studies have relied on cross-sectional data as opposed to the use of longitudinal data. The researchers forced to use all language-minority learners in all grade levels to make generalized interpretations of the data (Collier, 1992). Longitudinal approaches require the researchers to use the same group of participants over an extended duration to gauge their progress. Similarly, past research does not account for the student background variables despite having a major influence on their academic performance. Most importantly, every scholar is more interested in finding the challenges facing the

international students in their bid to gain English language proficiency as opposed to finding the solutions that may enhance their position. The current study offers insight into the use of reading and cross-cultural interactions to boost English language proficiency and, ultimately, academic performance of these students.

According to Klingner & Vaughn (1996), educational and cognitive development is entirely dependent on how well the structure of the learning environment enhances academic performance. Therefore, educators cannot assume that the international students will raise their English proficiency merely because they are placed in classroom settings together with the native English speakers. The teachers and instructors should know that telling the English speaking native students to cooperate with their peers who use English as the second language will never be enough to propel the latter to master the English language. The two groups will always find reasons to form language-based groups when in and out of the classroom because they do not share common interests.

Collier (1992) reminds the language-minority instructors to note that quick fixes are ineffective in the education setting because short-term results always depict the wrong picture of the exact level of student achievement. The educators can only gain the real picture of the students' performance after one or two years. The international

students and their educators may be overly excited about the new experience, particularly if they are new entrants into the learning programs. They may exhibit early gains because of the extra effort that they make due to the excitement of having achieved a lifelong goal of gaining admission or employment in the international schools. These gains may wear off within the succeeding months or years, as they get accustomed to being members of the new society.

Thus, the educators ought to use multidimensional approaches that promote interactions between the native English speakers and the foreigners trying to use English as their second language. Therefore, educators are encouraged to embrace the concept of cooperative learning because scholars have proven that such approaches can generate massive benefits for the non-native learners. Klingner & Vaughn (1996) argue that cooperative learning offers a unique opportunity and foundation for the students, who use English as their second language, to gain support from the native students and their bilingual peers. In most cases, the educators identify studying together with the native students as a key strategy for helping the international students to raise their proficiency in the dominant language as well as their academic performance.

The idea of participating in multicultural learning environment allows the international students to operate within collaborative
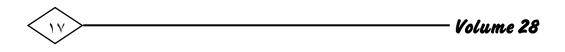
learning groups, which empower the second language learners to make repetitive use of their native languages to help each other understand complex procedures and instructions. Collaborative approaches allow the international students to help each other out when in difficulties regardless of whether the instructor understands their native languages or not. Klingner & Vaughn (1996) remind readers that the non-native students can manage to transfer the conceptual knowledge that they have developed using their native languages to English when they begin learning and understanding different vocabularies in English.

Conboy & Kuhl (2011) stipulate that infants gain the ability to distinguish and process different speech sounds through experiential learning. As such, they engage in social learning by listening and mimicking the speech sounds made by individuals close to them on a routine basis until they master their native languages. Social learning is a core approach to acquiring proficiency in a second language because it embeds the desired behaviors and meanings of a language into the life of the learner (Verga & Kotz, 2013). The interactions with the members of the community that uses the dominant dialect as the first language impacts affective factors that enable the learners to enhance the learning process or rather acquisition of that language.

The learners are struggling to communicate using the dominant languages often become objects of ridicule and negative stereotypes, which can have an adverse impact on their self-esteem. In severe cases, the victims may develop negative attitudes towards the dominant languages and other aspects of the native culture. In both cases, the result is the undermining of acquisition because the victims are unlikely to retain or strengthen their motivation to pursue measures designed to promote the learning of the dominant language. Motivation happens in two distinctive ways including integrative and instrumental forms. Research does not point out which type of motivation guarantees maximum attainment of goals.

Integrative motivation manifests itself in the form of endless desire to integrate oneself and become a member of the dominant language group. In the case of the international students, integrative motivation may involve a desire to join the wider community that uses English as the first language. Social interactions with members of the wider American society are key multidimensional approaches that can help the international students raise their mastery of the English language. According to El-Omari (2016), English learning can be positively influenced by extracurricular activities. Therefore, participating in community events may form part of the

extracurricular activities that can empower the international students to undergo cultural adjustment smoothly.

Instrumental motivation involves the act of learning the dominant language solely to gain the ability to attain a wider goal. The international students may exhibit their instrumental motivation by joining study groups controlled by the native language speakers. The international students are aware that their participation may limit by their incompetence in the dominant language. Nonetheless, they understand that they can learn more about the language through experiential learning by interacting with individuals who will force them to use that language repeatedly. The main goal is to use the language to excel in the major courses.

Regular social interactions between the international student and the native speakers create a platform where the former can meet bilinguals capable of offering support. Paradis, Schneider, & Duncan (2013) claim that bilinguals can share cognitive-linguistic interface skills with the English learners. For example, the bilinguals can use the story grammar skills to help the English learners to understand more about the second language (English) using parameters associated with the first language. Note that the first language denotes the dialect that the international student shares with the bilingual peer. In most cases, the first language is the one used in the international student's

country of origin. Bilingual approaches are more effective than the English-only interventions (August, Shanahan, & Escamilla, 2009).

At the individual level, international students should also increase their reading habits to train their young minds about the basic principles of the English language. Chai/ et al. (2016) claim that reading is an activity that inevitably recruits the human brain regions that is responsible for the mapping of the written dialects into the phonological representations. The process engages the visual word form area, which consistently activated whenever individuals read using dissimilar languages. A high degree of connectivity between the visual word form area and other parts of the brain, like the left mid-STG, guarantees an increase in the reading speed even when the learner is using the second language after undergoing extensive language training.

Having discussed these approaches, the main question in most people's mind is whether the English language proficiency related to the overall academic performance of the international students. According to El-Omari (2016), the competence of the students in English language is the main determinant of their academic performance. A study using 864 students majoring in economics and business courses showed that the learners who were active participants during the class discussions were enjoying more success in academics

than their inactive peers. The reasoning is that the students actively participating in the discussions were training themselves to use the second language every time they spoke, listened, and analyzed information.

Therefore, international schools ought to provide instructors and teachers who are highly qualified. Additionally, they should have a strong work ethic, perfect teaching licenses, and critical thinking ability (El-Omari, 2016). Caring and empathy should be innate dispositions of every educator dealing with a multicultural student base because some will struggle to understand the basic principles of the educational setting due to incompetence in the dominant culture. The international students using the dominant language as a second dialect will also make repetitive mistakes that ought to tolerate because they are in the learning process. Empathy and caring are virtues that can empower the educators to persist in the development of these learners, particularly when everyone else has lost hope and confidence in their ability to excel.
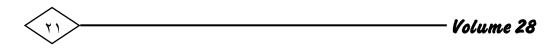
The teachers must be willing to perform as supportive classroom parents because support is a key ingredient in the learning process of all learners regardless of whether one is a native or non-native speaker. The international students using dominant language as their second dialect require constant support and, hence, schools must

have enough teachers to ensure that the welfare of the other students not neglected whenever a teacher goes to help struggling learners deal with complex issues. Funding of the schools is vital to guarantee smooth operations of the learning processes. The teachers with these traits can succeed in transforming international students from average academic performers into trailblazers.

Research Methodology

The researcher used a descriptive research design to base the entire fieldwork. The researcher had pinpointed the Saudi Arabian nationals studying in the U.S as the target population for the study. Additionally, the study used the stratified sampling method to group the participants into a group of ten candidates, which was the sample population. Random sampling was applied to select the three subjects who eventually became the study sample size. The following research questions are used to guide the current study:

I.   Does extensive reading help international students gain English language proficiency?

II.   Can collaborative studying with native learners empower international students to master English Language?

III. Can active participation in community events help international learners gain English language?

IV.   Does proficiency in English foster improvement in academic performance of the international students?

The researcher hoped that the findings would prove that the interventions above are effective. If so, the researcher intended to recommend the application of these strategies to help the international students achieve their goals and earn returns on their massive investment. The research involved a month-long survey using three participants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who have joined schools in the United States of America to pursue the Master's degree. The participants were enticed to participate in the study after being guaranteed confidentiality, which is the reason why the researcher used Code A, B, and C to identify them. Every day, the participants take part in three activities scheduled for one hour each.

The first activity involves the extensive reading of material content written in English. The participants visited the library and borrowed novels, magazines, newspapers, and books written in English. There was no limitation on the topics covered by the materials to help the participants to choose content related to their areas of interest. The research saw the participants pick materials related to lifestyle, health, sports, and fiction on numerous occasions. The second activity requires the participants to embrace collaborative

learning. In this case, the international students joined the native students in study groups for an hour every day.

The participants would make active contributions to the topics of discussion and request the native students to help when issues got complicated or difficult. Asking questions was a core activity during these discussion-oriented study groups. The last activity required the respondents to embrace cross-cultural relations by integrating themselves into the American community. The respondents would participate in communal activities like charity work, games, church, and others. Their responses collected through standardized questionnaires. The researcher used descriptive analysis to interpret the responses and cluster them based on the meaning. Sometimes the researcher would covertly send native students to interact with the respondents to gauge their progress.

Results

During the study, the researcher noted that the subjects were not engaging in the three activities equally. The level of motivation was different. Participants A and C were more committed to the activities than participant Code C. Therefore, the researcher tried to understand the personal, academic, and professional desires that were motivating these subjects to pursue education in international schools. The results are presented in the chart below.

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                    │ The perspective of foreign students │
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Personal	Academic	Professional
· to get to know another culture · to mature · to be challenged · to get to know themselves · to expand their view of the world · to experience something new and different · curiosity · leisure/ fun/travel · to get to know something different	· to learn or improve a language · a requirement of the university · to add to the CV · to continue with their studies · to study in an internationally renowned university	· to have an international career · to facilitate inclusion in the labor market · to search for professional opportunities · professional improvement · to look for international internship alternatives

Participants Code A and C claimed that they had joined these institutions for the three reasons. They believed that success in one of three perspectives led to progress in the other two. However, participant Code B argued that he was mostly interested in pursuing academic and professional goals. He claimed that there was no direct link between personal desires and improved academic performance. Thus, he saw no need of participating in non-curriculum activities.

The study produced three distinctive findings that associated with the three research objectives. Student Code A reported that the three strategies had empowered him to integrate into the society. The participant argued that reading more and studying with the native students more had enabled him to alleviate anxiety and tension that he

felt whenever he was required to use English to communicate. Additionally, participant Code A stated that integrating and interacting with the American community had served him well given that he was no longer fearful of being addressed or required to mingle with foreigners. In his response, participant Code A said that the "native students and community members always forced him to use English to fit into their groups." These strategies are reaping benefits in the form of improved academic performance. These results are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Results from Participant Code A

Activity	Outcome
Extensive reading	Reduced anxiety Reduced tension
Studying with native students	Forced use of English language
Active participation in community activities	Development of confidence when speaking and interacting with native learners
Overall Goal	Improved academic performance

Student Code B also reported that he had used the three strategies to boost his academic performance over the last one month. He identified the reading practice as one of the most productive strategies because it empowered him to improve his writing skills. Participant Code B stated "it is important to interact with persons outside one's cultural background to understand their languages, culture, and ways of life" He also reported that studying with the native students had helped him raise his grammar and vocabulary in the second language. Regular interactions with the members of the American community also produced similar results. However, he stated that he did not see any significant improvement in his academic performance because all these activities took place outside the classroom setting. For him, there is no connection between these activities and academic performance. These results are presented in the table below.

Table 2: Results from Participant Code B

Activity	Outcome
Extensive reading	Improved writing skills
Studying with native students	Improved grammar and vocabulary in second language
Active participation in community activities	Deep understanding of native languages, culture, and ways of life

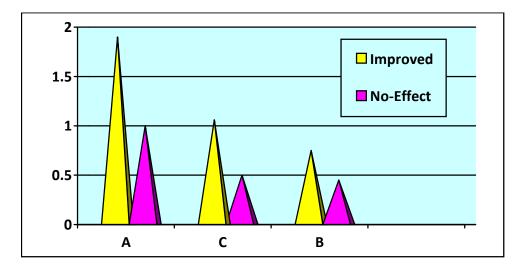| Activity	Outcome
Overall Goal	No improvement in academic performance

At the start of the study, student Code C claimed that she preferred studying with the native students and having solid interactions with the American community because she had read that these strategies could boost one's academic performance. After participating in the study for one month, participant Code C reported that she had gained first-hand experience about the benefits of these strategies. In particular, she managed to raise her academic grades after joining study groups with large numbers of native students and participating in events happening in the American community. She joined the native students and other members of the society in charity work and volunteer events during the weekends. These results are presented in the table below.

Table 3: Responses from Participants Code C

Activity	Outcome
Extensive reading	Improved cognitive skills
Studying with native students	Improved relations and support from native learners
Active participation in community activities	Deep understanding of native diversity

Activity	Outcome
Overall Achievement	improved academic performance

Chart 1: Overall Implications

Before the study, the participants had claimed that these activities would inevitably help them improve their academic performance. However, the results were different after the subjects participated in the study. Two-thirds of the participants reported that the three strategies had been beneficial to their academic lives because they empower an individual to learn and understand the dominant language. Gaining English language proficiency had made it easy to gain better academic performance because they could participate more in the learning process.

Discussion

A thorough analysis of the study data indicates that proficiency in the English language affects the experiences of the international students in diverse ways. A key aspect involves their interactions with other international and native students in the classroom setting. The study participants argued that they rarely spoke during lectures that required them to communicate using English. The instructors can only afford to give the students a few minutes to speak individually. Research indicates that most international students prefer answering questions or expressing their input in short sentences. The students are more comfortable when dealing with other international students than when they are in the midst of native speakers because they do not have confidence in the dominant language.

A large number of international students struggle to gain proficiency in the dominant language even after staying in the international schools for years. Understanding vocabularies and choosing how to apply different words remains a big problem for most of those students. These problems originate from the priorities of the international students, whose primary objective is to pursue their major as opposed to gaining English language proficiency. Most international students are not worried about the level of their English by the time they finish their university courses. The main

consideration is whether they attain an American university education and certification.

However, participation in different activities can improve the English language proficiency of these persons and, ultimately, raise their academic performance. For example, studying English language and other courses that promote the use of this language can be beneficial. In most international schools, students willing to raise their understanding of the English language tend to undertake general education courses. These courses require the students to read voluminous content. Initially, these courses designed to help students read and understand the content. The international students may write material using English without minding the grammar and vocabulary, which improve with time.

Some international students may disagree with the statement above because they do not see any clear relationship between mastering the English language and improved academic performance. These students are more interested in capturing the information in the material content rather than learn vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. However, linguistics experts argue that one cannot understand the material content if he or she does not know the basics of the language used to write it. Regular reading, writing, and speaking can help an

individual master the basics of a language. Individuals learn how to use a language by playing with different words regularly.

The multicultural campus environment offers another platform for international students to gain proficiency in English and, eventually, raise their academic performance. The effect of the multicultural environment on the international students is solely dependent on their response and reactions. For example, international students who respond to being placed in multicultural environments by forming groups based on their first languages are likely to accrue negative impacts. These students live, talk, play, and interact with the students who come from their national origins or understand their first languages only. As a result, they are incapable of improving their English because they do not practice.

However, students who embrace the concept of diversity in the multicultural environment always end up accruing positive impacts. The international students, in this category, are forced to learn more about the English language to communicate with their peers from diverse cultural and lingual backgrounds. Everyone participating in a multicultural environment must speak using a language that the others can understand. In most cases, English is the dominant language. According to Conboy & Kuhl (2011), individuals who participate in complex learning situations always tend to learn more than their peers

who only participate in the learning environments that are less complex.

Studying together with the native students places the international student in complex situations where they must focus and put more effort to succeed. The same case applies when an international students opts to engage in regular interactions with members of the native community. The international students are required to ask for help from the native speakers when they struggle to understand vocabularies and instructions. Communicating with the native students and local communities requires one to play with different words repeatedly. Foreigners who manage to attain high-level English language proficiency are likely to participate more in the classroom setting because they no longer constrained by lingual constraints.

According to Horwitz (2016), international students with high involvement in the classroom setting and teacher support low experience levels of anxiety. Close interactions with individuals with the perfect mastering of the dominant language give one confidence in his or her ability to master that language. More so, it allows the outsiders to create and maintain a strong relationship with the native persons. The relationship is a key source of support. For example, international students with strong relationships with the native

students assured of support in the classroom. Knowing that one cannot count on the native speakers can help the international students to experience lowered anxiety when participating in lectures, discussions, and other academic tasks requiring the use of English. These achievements translate into increased commitment, morale, and productivity in academics.

Conclusion

The current study used three students to gauge the effectiveness of three distinctive interventions to the academic performance of the international students. These included extensive reading, collaborative studying with native students, and active participation in events controlled by the American community. Two participants reported that the interventions had triggered a significant improvement in their academic performance while the other respondent reported seeing no improvement. However, all participants reported that these interventions had improved their English language proficiency considerably. These results indicate that social support can boost both the integrative and instrumental forms of motivation, which pushes a person to pursue proficiency in the dominant language. English language proficiency is vital to the educational achievements of the international learners because their major courses taught using the language. They must attain proficiency in the English language to gain

the ability to understand, assess, interpret, and comprehend the instructions and other course content. Unfortunately, past studies filled with inconsistencies because some scholars believe that English language proficiency can trigger an improvement in academic performance while other provides contrary findings. Nonetheless, the application of the social learning theory indicates that the results of the current study are valid.

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