Multilingual Learners' Resilience of Navigating the Culture Shock of Online English Instruction

Gwendolyn Williams, Auburn University, United States
Mary Diamond, Auburn Global, United States

Abstract

This study examines how international students faced the double culture shocks of learning within a new culture as well as learning in an on-line environment (Sadykova & Meskill, 2019). Additionally, multilingual learners often face linguistic and cultural challenges in their efforts to participate online (Harrison et al, 2020). This study examined how the students described the various challenges they faced as evidenced through their written journal assignments both at the beginning and the end of the semester after they had become accustomed to online instruction. The research questions for this study were as follows: What challenges did the students encounter when they migrated to on-line English learning? What strategies did the students find to be most helpful to adjusting to learning English through an on-line platform? Findings revealed that the students reported various experiences from the euphoria of learning at home, their frustration with technology issues, interaction challenges, and instructional distractions. The presentation will describe the personal strategies that the students developed to support reach equilibrium in their own learning. After exploring the themes of the findings, the presentation will empower participants by offering practical suggestions for supporting students in online English instruction to address the concerns revealed in the study's data.

Keywords: Online Instruction, Acculturation, Resilience, Multilingual Learners

Introduction

Multilingual learners (ML) students face many challenges as they adjust to learning in a new environment. These challenges were compounded by the sudden move to online learning in March 2020. This study examines student texts written from March-December 2020 which answer questions about how students coped with the challenges of acculturating to a new learning environment online in addition to adapting to the US university academic expectations. Students described the challenges they faced in this new educational context before discussing the resources and strategies they used to persevere in making progress toward their goals. Based on the students' responses, suggestions for supporting ML learners' acculturation to online learning are provided.

The possible culture shocks felt by international students in the US include cultural, and linguistic challenges. Students must adjust to a new way of learning and being while relying on their different past experiences (Bai & Wang, 2022). Some of the cultural struggles that international students encounter can include differences in relationship norms, occupational routines, or social expectations (Antoniadou & Quinlan, 2020). From a linguistic perspective, study abroad students may face difficulties in communicating with people from other cultures (Cao et al, 2021), or forming personal relationships for social support (Lowinger et al, 2014).

For students in March 2020, the challenges that accompany face-to-face instruction were at least doubled, if not exponentially increased, when they added another new environment and culture of online learning to those of the US and their past learning cultures (Sadykova & Meskill, 2019). These challenges can be considered part of the process of academic acculturation, a process in which students grapple with the differences and distance between their past experiences and their current circumstances (Jiang et al., 2010). The number of differences and distance between the competing cultures can all impact the level of difficulty for MLs navigating the process of academic acculturation (Bastien et al., 2018; Cao et al. 2021).

Academic Acculturation

Academic acculturation difficulties for MLs include linguistic and learning challenges. Linguistic challenges students may face include difficulty understanding spoken and written assignment expectations, difficulty understanding language used in class and its rapidity as well as concerns with confidence in participating in class (Bai & Wang, 2022; Bastien et al., 2018; Cao et al., 2021; and Lee 2020). One major obstacle for international students has been the amount of academic reading that has been required to complete their coursework (Cao et al., 2021). Furthermore, students are expected to read extensively and then critique the academic texts as a basis for writing to demonstrate content area mastery (Wang & Bai, 2021). MLs learning challenges may include a mismatch between their past experiences and the current expectations of the new learning environment in addition to unfamiliarity with engagement strategies in class and the need for balancing one's own learning and living experiences (Bai & Wang, 2022; Cao et al. 2021).

Online Learning

Online learning acculturation for MLs overlaps with the challenges of academic acculturation in general and presents new challenges as well that are not present in face-to-face learning environments. Some of these challenges are linguistic issues of not having the language to

fully participate to facing a change in language use from spoken language to primarily written forms of communication in online learning environment (Lee, 2020; Sailsman, 2020). Other research indicates that MLs have challenges finding opportunities to interact online (Bailey & Lee, 2020) and becoming autonomous learners (Bich & Lian, 2022). Additionally, learning challenges for MLs studying online in March 2020 directly corresponded to the change in interaction and mode of class meetings (Harrison et al., 2018; Marshall & Kostka 2020).

Research Questions

Considering the multiple layers of possible circumstances impacting ML students in March 2020, the authors of this report asked the following questions: What challenges did the students encounter when they migrated to on-line English learning? What strategies did the students find to be most helpful to adjusting to learning English through an on-line platform?

Data Collection

To answer those questions the authors examined written texts produced by undergraduate students were enrolled in courses in an academic English language program at a four-year university. The students' English proficiency levels ranged from intermediate Intensive English Program to advanced students in a Pathway program. Their courses included advanced writing, high intermediate integrated skills, and intermediate reading/writing.

The writing samples were all submitted as part of assignments in courses in an IEP or Pathway English for Speakers of Other Languages courses from Spring 2020-Spring 2021 as that program was entirely online during that time, returning to campus in Fall of 2021. The assignments to which students responded varied over time, with the initial texts directly asking students to work in a small group to answer questions about their recent/current transition to online instruction. For these samples, entire classes were included. Some of the later texts were reflective essays one to three semesters after March 2020's digital migration that required students to demonstrate a cause/effect pattern. For those samples, participants could choose to address the issue of online learning, and students in those classes who did not address the topic were not included. Once identifying information was removed, the samples were coded for recurring themes (Nowell et al., 2017), which reflected different challenges faced by the students in their transition from on campus to online courses. In addition, the sample texts were coded for positive, negative, and neutral overall attitude toward online learning.

Students' Challenges

The three most common themes in the data were challenges with technology, learning environment, and interaction. Students' concerns with technology range from unfamiliarity with online platforms and online learning skills to connectivity issues and poor equipment. On student noted, "I am a person that get used to taking notes on paper notebook rather than laptop." While another complained, "I am a low-tech person and never have an online class before, so I really got messed up with the new toolbar." For another student, a "technology issue also happened on me which caused I can hardly hear and understand what the teacher was saying and teaching." While all the students were enrolled in the same synchronous course, the challenges varied across participants.

Distractions were the most often mentioned challenge in terms of online learning environments, with students juggling laptops in spaces with many tempting devices at hand (Li, 2022). One of the students explained, "Sometimes, it's hard for me to pay attention to the study, it's easy attracted by mobile phone or game on laptop…I know what I hope to gain." The motivation to remain focused on the course content was a challenge as the students adjusted to their new environment. For some, simply being online was a distraction because of all the demands for attention in the learning management system. Therefore, the various tasks required for online instruction could distract the student from the content that was being studied if the students did not receive appropriate guidance from the instructor (Bich & Lian, 2021). Beyond the technological distractions, students also lamented that the physical study environment was not conducive to learning. One student commented, "cause I am in my bedroom and there are too many stuff that attracts me more...we are losing the study atmosphere." In addition, interaction concerns included both learning and linguistic challenges. A student describes the circumstance this way, "online study sometimes is hard for us to ask question." This difficulty relates to both the participation expectations of interaction in US classrooms and the unique challenges of participating online in English.

Students' Strategies

For each type of challenge, students provided descriptions of the strategies they used to persist in their programs. For technology issues students relied on online resources, which compensated for network issues and for linguistic challenges like rate of speech in academic lectures. As one student stated, "I can watch the teaching video in any time." The students demonstrated resilience when faced with a distracting new learning environment by identifying the challenges and planning to overcome them. One student noted the 'need to learn about how to resist temptation." Also, students adjusted to new their new, online circumstances by using new methods and new technologies to mimic classroom interaction. Such a deliberate creation of online spaces for communication among class members enabled students to connect to their peers in order to facilitate content mastery (Sailsman, 2020). According to a student, "study groups can be arranged online, making lessons easier." While not all students would agree about the ease of online learning, this learner found a new way to meet interaction challenges that often were reported as lacking from online language learning environments (Harrison et al., 2018).

Students' Resilience

In some ways, the sudden transition to online learning may have allowed students to see their academic acculturation process from a new perspective. In March, students were suddenly asked to engage in yet more new ways in addition to the behaviors such as note taking on paper in a prescribed manner and classroom interaction techniques like raising hands and waiting to talk to an instructor in person after class. One student in March commented that their "friend was worried about taking notes, she wasn't good at taking notes on the laptop, so do I, but I think we can find a way to figure it out." Many students did develop new strategies for incorporating new technologies while others simply continued to use paper and pen, but at home and in their own styles. For most of the students, their programs of study began in January 2020, so their experiences by December demonstrated persistence as few new students joined the courses that year. Despite remaining in the program, many students returned to their home countries with their differing time zones. Addressing a possibly twelve-hour time difference between local time and synchronous class time, a student in May described the situation "at the beginning of the remote teaching because my daily schedule is

extremely messy at that time. But I reset it as soon as I can, so that, I can attend all the rest of the class." Continuing to respond to the challenges of their new learning environment, students demonstrated resilience by developing strategies so that they could navigate between two places at once. Further, students' evolving attitudes toward online learning over the course of the three semesters also reflect the students' resilience (Bai & Wang, 2022). In the last semester of the study data, a student admits that "For me, I was doing not well at the beginning of the remote class because it is totally new stuff for me, so I need to spend some time getting used to it and now I'm doing much better than before." This December comment reflects the overall trend of the students' attitudes from initially pleased with the opportunity to continue their academic programs online in March to more dissatisfaction in the May set and finally acceptance in the last group of texts. Therefore, students progressed through the acculturation process until they were able to develop a sense of equilibrium in their new learning context.

Conclusion

Given the challenges experienced by the students in the study in acculturating to the online learning environment, there are several suggestions for mitigating the obstacles by creating digital classroom environments that support the students' unique needs. For example, early and ongoing incorporation of digital interactions, resources, and platforms as part of a face-to-face course can prepare students for the sudden migration that this cohort experienced. Though the online only circumstances of the 2020 COVID-19 landscape have evolved, many educational outlets are now using e-learning days and online class meetings to cope with smaller scale events like weather-related school closures. For many students and educators, the need to prepare for a move online is still evident.

In addition, the concerns expressed by the students' written statements indicate that more explicit instruction in online interaction is necessary. Again, early and ongoing incorporation of a blended classroom model may mitigate the discomfort students face if forced online. Similarly, explicit acknowledgement of the challenges of academic and technological acculturation processes for international students as articulated in the literature can allow students to situate themselves in the variety of responses to the challenges and develop strategies to overcome them.

Suggestions for Instructors to Help MLs Acculturate to Online Instruction

- Include clear, detailed assignment descriptions with rubrics and instructions for using the LMS.
- Provide redundant resources so students can access them asynchronously as well.
- Plan for meaningful interaction and community building during synchronous online instruction.
- Maintain consistent teacher presence throughout the course.
- Incorporate other devices so they are tools for learning, not temptations.

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Contact email: gmw0015@auburn.edu