

MIRANDA, Alex y WHELAN, Eileen. Success or failure in community college-level ESL writing course: a comparison of demographic, academic and acculturation-related variables. En: Revista ieRed: Revista Electrónica de la Red de Investigación Educativa [en línea]. Vol.1, No.4 (Enero-Junio de 2006). Disponible en Internet: <<http://revista.iered.org>>. ISSN 1794-8061

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SUCCESS OR FAILURE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE-LEVEL ESL WRITING COURSE: A COMPARISON OF DEMOGRAPHIC, ACADEMIC AND ACCULTURATION-RELATED VARIABLES

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Los estudiantes de Inglés en los Estados Unidos usualmente inician sus estudios en instituciones preuniversitarias de dos años donde pueden mejorar sus habilidades lingüísticas, antes de ingresar a la universidad para optar un título. En una institución preuniversitaria en el sureste de los Estados Unidos, 210 estudiantes se inscribieron en cursos de escritura del inglés como segunda lengua en los niveles bajo-intermedio, alto intermedio y avanzado. Aproximadamente el 45% de estos estudiantes tuvo que repetir el curso por lo menos una vez. Este estudio se desarrolló para determinar si ciertos factores contribuyen al éxito o fracaso en la escritura del inglés a nivel universitario, es decir, para determinar si los estudiantes tuvieron que repetir los cursos de escritura. La hipótesis de esta investigación contempla que variables demográficas y de aculturación juegan un papel importante en el éxito o fracaso de los cursos de escritura del inglés como segunda lengua.

Para examinar este interrogante, se tuvieron en cuenta estos criterios: Lugar de graduación de secundaria de los estudiantes, es decir si ésta tuvo lugar en los Estados Unidos o en el país natal, edad actual, edad de migración, periodo de residencia en los Estados Unidos, número de horas laboradas por semana, índices de aculturación, lengua más frecuentemente utilizada, y percepción del prejuicio contra el hablante no nativo de inglés por parte de hablantes nativos de dicho idioma. Se recolectó información demográfica y de aculturación por medio de la Escala Americana de Relaciones Internacionales (AIRS, Sodowsky y Plake, 1991). Esto permitió establecer que el éxito en cursos de escritura del inglés como segunda lengua a nivel universitario puede ser afectado por variables como el periodo de residencia en los Estados Unidos, la edad del estudiante en el momento de migración, el número de horas trabajadas por semana, y la percepción de los estudiantes del prejuicio que los hablantes nativos de inglés tienen de ellos.

La aculturación y la adquisición de una segunda lengua se interrelacionan. Cuando los individuos de una cultura se ponen en continuo contacto con otra cultura, cambian sus patrones de conducta. De este modo la aculturación cumple un papel significativo y produce un impacto psicológico que puede influenciar todos los aspectos del comportamiento en la nueva cultura. Este estudio sugiere que el éxito en la escritura del inglés como segunda lengua está afectado por variables multifacéticas y la adquisición de las habilidades de escritura de la citada lengua no solamente está determinada por factores académicos sino también por

factores de aculturación. Por ello se recomienda adelantar otras investigaciones de este fenómeno en países angloparlantes, así como también estudios de la adquisición de la escritura en contextos donde el inglés se utiliza como lengua extranjera. Esta comparación puede ayudar a medir la profundidad y el sentido que cumple la aculturación en un país angloparlante en la adquisición del inglés como una segunda lengua.

1. Context

Acculturation is a "phenomenon that results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous, firsthand contact with subsequent changes in the original pattern of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936, p.149). Miranda and Umhoefer (1998) and Padilla (1980) suggested that acculturation and second language acquisition have been related to such extent that the constructs frequently are interchangeably used.

Miranda and Matheny (2000) addressed the psychological impact of acculturation to indicate that acculturation has a pervasive influence on all aspects of functioning. However ubiquitous the influence of acculturation may be on second language acquisition, more studies are necessary to examine the connection between acculturation and the successful completion of college-level English as a Second Language (ESL) courses intended to increase English language proficiency. Moreover, additional studies are necessary to evaluate the differences between students who successfully complete college-level ESL courses and those who fail.

In the present study we examine numerous factors to differentiate between students who pass college-level ESL writing courses from those who fail. Specifically, we evaluated high school graduation [country of origin or the United States, (U.S.)], age, age of migration, length of residence in the U.S., number of hours worked per week, and objectively measured indices of acculturation, language used and perceived prejudice.

We hypothesized that demographic and acculturation-related variables differed between students who passed and students who repeated ESL writing courses. Before the presentation of the results and the discussion of the findings, we review the literature with regard to the relationship between acculturation and second language acquisition, ethnic identity and second language acquisition, and stress and acculturation. We have found that ethnic identity and stress, especially resultant from the acculturation process itself, are critical factors that influence acculturation and second language acquisition (Miranda & Umhoefer, 1998).

The Connection Between Acculturation and Language Acquisition

Schumann's (1978a) model of language acquisition linked proficiency in a second language to the level of acculturation. According to Schumann, second language learners who were low in acculturation to a target language community failed to progress beyond the early stages of language acquisition because the need for language was for basic information exchange as opposed to social identification or the realization of personal attitudes (Ellis, 1994). Schumann's model assumed, furthermore, a linear relationship between language acquisition and acculturation, and the existence of mediators between the two factors.

Schumann (1978b) proposed that social and psychological distance mediated between acculturation and second language acquisition. Social distance explained socio-interactive patterns between the language learner and the target language group while psychological distance explained the language learner's comfort with the process of learning a new language. Psychological distance was the result of factors such as levels of language shock, culture shock, motivation and ego permeability (McLaughlin, 1987; Schumann, 1978b). Some disagreed with Schumann's view because it assumed that acculturation was a unitary rather than a multidimensional process.

Berry (1980), an advocate of a multidimensional view of acculturation, proposed four distinct approaches to acculturation that depended upon the interplay of sociological and psychological factors. Unlike Schumann, Berry (1980) viewed acculturation as a multidimensional process that did not inevitably result in the loss of the native culture by a second language learner as acculturation increased. The four modes of acculturation resulted from a dynamic, subjective process in which the individual negotiated both cultures. The first mode, Separation, involved a near exclusive allegiance to the native culture while the practices of the host culture were neglected and not incorporated into a functional repertoire. Assimilation was believed to be contrary to separation. Assimilation involved the near exclusive identification with the host culture while the native cultural practices were abandoned. The third acculturation alternative, Deculturation, perhaps the most psychologically and socially damaging acculturation stance, involves the rejection of both cultures during the acculturation process.

Those in the Integration acculturation alternative are involved and equally identified with their native and the host cultures. Keefe (1980), Giles and Byrne (1982), and most recently Miranda and Umhoefer (1998) used the term biculturality to address Integration in the study of the relationship between psychological resiliency and acculturation. Miranda and Umhoefer (1998) noted that acculturation was inextricably related to language acquisition as was ethnic identity. Moreover, Gibson (2001) noted that processes of acculturation depend largely upon where the immigrants settle in the United States, what ethnic and social class groups comprise the community in which they live and with whom they come into contact. The culture to which they are exposed is not necessarily a standard form of American culture, thus reducing contact with standard American English (Ariza, 1991; Gibson, 2001).

The Connection Between Ethnic Identity and Language Acquisition

Lambert (1974) addressed the connection between ethnic identity and language acquisition in terms of additive or subtractive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism, akin to Berry's Integration, involved the process of addition of the target language without the loss of the native language or the practices of the native culture. Additive bilingualism occurred when the language learner had a positive view of the native culture's ethnic identity and of the culture of the target language community. Contrarily, subtractive bilingualism occurred when the language learner's desire was to assimilate into the target language community and had a low estimation of the native culture's cultural identity. Fishman (1981) stated that subtractive bilingualism tends to be a natural occurrence that takes place over a period of generations and immigrants who maintain the ethnic language are the exception rather than the rule.

Young and Gardner (1990) assumed that a linear relationship existed between ethnic identity and second language acquisition. Specifically, Young and Gardner showed that those language learners who identified with the target language community were the ones who demonstrated higher levels of non-native language proficiency (Clement, 1980; Gardner, 1985). An obvious connection to the aforementioned position was that similarities between cultures facilitated cultural identification with a host culture and, consequently, second language acquisition. That is, marked similarities between host and the native cultures insured higher levels of second language acquisition (Svanes, 1988).

Portes and Zhou (1993) and others (Portes, 1994; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996) described acculturation and mobility patterns in terms of segmented assimilation. Ethnic groups who improve their economic situations by completely integrating socially, politically and culturally in the traditional linear pattern easily assimilate into the middle class, become upwardly mobile, and are able to interact using the English language. Many Cuban exiles in Miami typify this type of immigrant (Portes & Stepick, 1993).

According to Portes and Stepick (1993), ethnic groups who practice selective acculturation or selective assimilation adjust their lives in the new country so they may deliberately maintain the native culture while rapidly climbing the socioeconomic ladder. Many Vietnamese, especially in New Orleans and California, exemplify this pattern, as they are able to function in both cultures and languages (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou & Bandston, 1998).

Finally, downward assimilation results in poverty, unemployment and the inability to become prosperous or integrate into the middle class. Many Haitians, who reside in Southern Florida, suffer this misfortune. This marginalization may lead to a feeling of rejection of their native culture as the young immigrants try to blend into the mainstream of those born in the United States. Young Haitians often assume the identity, lifestyle, language variations and mannerisms of African American youth to gain acceptance by their peers which leads to a rejection of the native cultures and a denial of knowledge of the native language (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Portes & Zhou, 1993).

Gibson (1988, 1998) described additive acculturation as the ideal situation where the children of immigrants acquire the positive aspects and language of the new culture while enjoying the strong bonds of the native cultural and values. Larsen and Smalley (1972) discussed at length the topic of similarity between cultures as a catalyst to second language acquisition. Cultural alienation resulted from the target language community's view of the language learner as an alien within a community of domestics (Larsen & Smalley, 1972). To experience acceptance, the language learner had to undergo a process of dealienation or redomestication which may have led to neodomesticism and, consequently, higher second language acquisition (Gardner, 1985). However, this process was explained devoid of attention to stress factors that are inevitable in the process of redomestication. This serious shortcoming is addressed in the studies that link acculturation to stress.

The Connection Between Acculturation and Stress

Culture shock and acculturative stress were attributed to the motivation and the diversion of attention and psychological energy away from successful second language acquisition (Schumann, 1975; Smalley, 1972). According to this model, the language learner seeks to

assign blame for unpleasant feelings that originate from a state of psychological stress, to individuals from the host culture, a sponsoring immigration service agency, or their native culture. The results may be manifested in negative acculturation strategies that may result in ineffective attempts to relate to either the native or the host culture (Berry, 1980). A specific feeling state has been associated with culture shock.

Homesickness has been described as a precursor to culture shock. When an individual is in culture shock, symbols of the native culture such as foods, amusements, and holidays may take on exaggerated levels of importance that may leave limited energies to acquire a second language (Schumann, 1975). This notion is an extension of Smalley's (1963) assertion that culture shock may inhibit second language acquisition by hindering identification with a host culture due to excessive worry about "germs, sickness, and choosing to live a ghettoized life among members of the native culture" (p. 53).

2. Method

Participants

The participants were 210 ESL students from a two-year community college who were enlisted in either the low-intermediate, high-intermediate, or advanced ESL writing course. The participants were assigned to a level of instruction following English proficiency evaluations designed and implemented by the ESL Department. Students assigned to the low-intermediate ESL courses were deemed to be the least proficient in English. The students placed in the high-intermediate ESL courses were deemed to have basic English proficiency. Last, those students who were assigned to the advanced ESL courses were deemed to be nearly proficient enough in English to attend regular college courses.

We classified students into the repeater or non-repeater groups based on their academic histories in ESL courses. The repeater group comprised students who repeated a college-level ESL course at least once. Those students who never failed a course comprised the second group though we excluded those who were taking a course for the first time.

Demographic Characteristics

Two hundred and ten ESL students participated in this study, 118 (56.2%) females and 92 (43.8%) males. The average age was 22.8 years old, the standard deviation was 4.5 years. The participants originated from Asia (59.5%); Africa (11.5%); Europe (9.5%); South-America, Central American, and Caribbean (8.1%); Arabia (7.2%); and India (3.3%). Only two participants (1%) omitted information about their country of origin.

English was the second language learned for 71.5% of the participants. Fifty-nine (28.1%) participants indicated that English was the third or fourth language learned. The average age of migration to the United States (U.S.) was 18.9 years old with a standard deviation of 4.9 years. The average length of residence in the U.S. was 4.0 years with a standard deviation of 3.4 years. The range of U.S. residence was from less than six months to 21 years.

Most of the participants were legal residents or citizens (61.4%). The next largest group (33.8%) comprised students with a student visa. Ten (4.8%) participants neglected to indicate their legal status. The majority of participants (59.0%) graduated from high

schools outside of the U.S. The remaining participants (41.0%) graduated from high schools in the U.S.

Business was the most frequent educational subject selected by the participants, 29.4%. Other educational subjects with percentages in parentheses were as follows: Engineering (18.6%); Nursing (10.0%); Computer Science (8.6%); Pharmacy (5.2%); Medical Technology (4.8%); Pre-medicine (3.8%); Art (2.9%); Pre-Dentistry, Sciences, and Architecture (1.4%); and Languages, Law, and Social Work (.5%). Thirty-three (15.7%) participants omitted a response to this question.

Most participants were employed (61.0%). The remainder were unemployed (38.6%). For the employed, "food service" (18.1%) was the most frequently indicated occupation. Other students worked in retail (13.8%), service (5.7%), medical technology fields (4.3%), laborer/factory (3.8%), clerical (2.9%), managerial (1.9%), private business (1.4%), and as illustrator (.5%). Many participants (74.3%) indicated that they lived with family members. A small number of students (9.0%) lived alone while a larger number lived with roommates (15.2%).

Procedure

The director of the ESL Department of a two-year community college located in a large metropolitan area of the southeastern U.S. granted permission to conduct the study. Full-time and adjunct ESL instructors volunteered to collect data in their classes following an initial meeting with the researchers. Data were collected during regularly scheduled classes from students who volunteered their participation.

It took approximately 20 minutes for the participants to complete the research questionnaires. The participants were informed by the instructors about the nature of the study, the possible uses of the information, the manner in which data would be handled and by whom, and about their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time during the data gathering period.

The participants completed a written consent form, and anonymously completed a demographic questionnaire and the American-International Relations Scale (AIRS, Sodowsky & Plake, 1991). The data collection period lasted approximately two weeks. Once the data was collected it was compiled, prepared, and coded to conduct the statistical analyses using a commercially available computer program.

Instruments

- Demographic Questionnaire.

We solicited information about gender, age, country of origin, native language, languages other than English spoken, length of residence in the U.S., age of migration, educational major, employment, immigration status, courses enrolled in, number of times ESL courses were repeated and living situation.

- American-International Relations Scale (AIRS).

The AIRS (Sodowsky & Plake, 1991) is a 34-item, paper-and-pencil, objective instrument designed to measure "within and between group differences, culture-conflict resolution,

and acculturation options" (Sodowsky & Plake, 1991, p. 215). The AIRS assesses Acculturation, Language Use, and Perceived Prejudice, factors involved in cultural adaptation. On the AIRS, respondents are asked to answer eight multiple choice and 26 items on a 6 point Likert-type scale. The Likert-type items are answered from "agree strongly" (6) to "disagree strongly" (1). A factor analysis was employed to arrive at the three scales. A complete review of the psychometric properties of the AIRS can be found in Sodowsky and Plake's (1991) manuscript on the development of this instrument.

Full scale and subscale Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the norm group were reported to be .89, .88, .79, and .82, respectively (Sodowsky & Plake, 1991). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha were .72 (Acculturation), .66 (Perceived Prejudice), .70 (Language Use) and .78 for the full instrument.

3. Results

We use alpha at .05 as the minimal level at which results are considered statistically significant. First, we calculated a Chi-square analysis to evaluate the influence of where the participants' high school graduation took place on his or her placement in ESL college-level course.

Differences among Participants According to High School Graduation in the U.S. or Another Country

The Chi-square analysis indicated that the low-intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced level participants differed in relation to the country in which graduation from high school took place ($X^2 = 9.93$, $df = 2$, $p < .006$). Participants who graduated from high school in another country were more numerous in the advanced college-level ESL course (54.1%). That is, U.S. high school graduation was not a necessary or sufficient condition to place students in advanced college-level ESL courses when conducting the department-based placement evaluations.

Division of Participants Into the Passer and the Repeater Group

The data revealed that nearly 45% of the participants repeated ESL courses at least once. Within the group of those who repeated courses, 6.7% repeated a course twice and 17.6% repeated three or more times.

Differences between Students who Repeated and Students who Passed College-level ESL Courses

We calculated a Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to examine the differences between those students who passed and those who repeated ESL courses. We used a MANOVA to compare the groups on a number of factors; however, to control the effects of multiple comparisons we adjusted the alpha level by way of the Bonferoni technique (Huck, Cormier, & Bounds, 1974).

The null hypothesis that demographic and objectively assessed acculturation factors did not differ between students who passed and students who repeated college-level ESL courses was rejected by the Wilk's Lambda criterion ($F = 2.57$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). Univariate

F-tests of the factors used in the MANOVA revealed that the variables length of residence in the U.S. ($F = 8.42$, $df = 1$, 89 , $p < .01$), age of migration ($F = 5.31$, $df = 1$, 89 , $p < .01$), number of hours worked per week ($F = 9.89$, $df = 1,89$, $p < .001$), and Perceived Prejudice ($F = 1.09$, $df = 1$, 89 , $p < .01$) differentiated between those who passed and those who failed college-level ESL courses.

4. Discussion and Implications for Teaching

Placement in ESL College-level Writing Course as a Result of High School Graduation in the U.S. or Other Countries

It is appealing to assume that U.S. high school graduation leads to greater proficiency in the English language and subsequent readiness for advanced college-level ESL writing courses. This assumption may rest on the logic that graduation from a U.S. high school allows increased exposure to English instruction, and more opportunities for cultural accommodation and enhancement of language skills necessary for successful completion of college-level courses.

The results of our study dispute the aforementioned assumption. Specifically, we found that those students who graduated from high school in another country were more frequently placed in the advanced college-level ESL writing course (54.1%). However, existing and emerging second language acquisition research may clarify the disparity in written English proficiency between graduates from American high schools and those from other countries. For example, Scarcella (1996) suggested that second language learners speak English following a brief exposure to the American culture, though the nature of the language used may be non-standard. Cummins (1981a, 1981b) indicated that a type of conversational language, referred to as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), is a functional language derived from situational, context-embedded and paralinguistic cues such as body language, speech intonations and facial expressions. Though a functional fluency in the English language can be obtained rather quickly, students' proficiency in oral language skills must not be confused with the ability to engage in college-level academic work.

Our finding that U.S. high school graduation does not lead to placement in advanced college-level ESL writing courses raises questions about the influences on the development of English language proficiency in high school. It is possible that further explanation of this phenomenon may be derived from what Collier (1987), Collier and Thomas (1989), Cummins (1981a, 1981b, 1997, in press), Short and Spanos (1989), and Thomas and Collier (1997) suggested. These researchers showed that basic oral language proficiency is not a sufficient foundation to adequately and efficiently perform in the standard English-speaking classroom. Furthermore, these researchers attributed the academic insufficiency to a lack of exposure to and understanding of academic vocabulary, and content-specific language necessary to successfully engage in advanced academic tasks. It is also possible that interruption of learning opportunities in the native language impaired the development of proficiency in the target language.

Cummins (1994) suggested that the Common Underlying Proficiency model of language learning explained how the skills and knowledge in one language transferred to another. Furthermore, Cummins posited that a second language learner with substantial

instructional time in the native language enjoyed the benefits of being able to transfer previously acquired skills and knowledge to the second language. Cummins (1981a, 1981b) maintained that students needed to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), the academic language germane to engaging in context-reduced instructional activities. Cummins' research supports the belief that native language academic skills can be transferred to the second language. This sentiment was echoed by Thomas and Collier (1997) who suggested that an average of five to seven years is necessary for second language learners to develop academic language ability.

Success or Failure in College-level ESL Courses

Failing to pass college-level ESL writing courses was a frequent occurrence for the students sampled. Nearly 45% of the sampled students failed a college-level ESL course at least once. More importantly, a sizable group of students experienced frequent failures evidenced by the repetition of courses twice, three or more times.

We see the necessity for longitudinal studies that follow college-level ESL students through their college experience to ascertain the influence of single and frequent failures on educational commitment and stamina, and overall academic achievement. The high frequency of failures may have implications for dynamics inherent in ESL instruction and the overall functioning of college-level ESL departments. The finding that nearly half of the students who participated in this study repeated a course at least once suggest that significant resources may be expended by ESL departments in the duplication of services.

Differences Between those Who Fail and Those Who Pass College-level ESL Courses

Differences exist between students who pass and students who fail college-level ESL writing courses. Specifically, the differences are related to the length of residence in the U.S., age of migration, number of hours worked per week and the degree to which the student perceives to be the target of prejudice.

Evidently, the students who experienced the least failures in college-level ESL writing courses migrated to the United States at a later age. Also, longer residence in the U.S. seemed to buffer students from failure in ESL writing courses. Additionally, less involvement in work-related activities contributed to the students' academic success. Last, those who frequently failed courses perceived themselves as being the targets of prejudice.

In general, the findings of this study suggest that the experience of success in college-level ESL writing courses is multifaceted and sensitive to dynamics beyond academic achievement and proclivity. Success in passing college-level ESL writing courses relates to migration factors, age, extent of involvement in work-related activities, and the perception of others' prejudice toward them. It appears judicious to assume that success in college-level ESL writing courses is related to the students' historical, psychological, sociological and migration realities.

Though the shortcomings do not abrogate the importance of this study, it is noteworthy that the participants came from only one two-year, junior college. Future research may include a wider sample and ESL students, for example those from four-year institutions. Furthermore, placement of students at a level of instruction was based on an in-house developed placement instrument and criteria to determine English-language proficiency.

Given that the instrument and process were not adequately validated it is possible that neither the process nor the instrument addressed important determinants of readiness for college-level education. In other words, if the process and instrument used to place students is deficient in reliability and marginal in predictive validity the placement is questionable the results of this study may be different.

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