

## RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: An Overlooked Field

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### CBIE PHD RESEARCH

#### INTRODUCTION

Canada is becoming a more attractive destination for international students. Accelerating this push to globalize higher education, the Canadian government has recently announced a national strategy to double the number of international students within the next decade, aiming to attract over 200,000 incoming students per year (Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada, 2014). The federal government is not alone in this initiative. Canadian universities have also set their sights on attracting overseas students. For example, the University of Ottawa aims to “double the number of international graduate students from 700 to 1,400, and increase the international student undergraduate population by 50% from 1,500 to 2,250 thus making international students 9% of the entire student body” (University of Ottawa, 2014, p. 8). While Canadian universities are enthusiastic to embrace internationalization, the academic community, including both researchers and administrators, has paid little attention to the very important topic which lies at the heart of education, namely the quality of international student teaching and learning (IS T&L) (Arenas, 2009; Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Viète, 2009).

In the vast body of literature on international student experience in Western Anglophone universities, only 11.4% of research studies focused on teaching, learning, and incorporating an international curriculum (Abdullah, Aziz, & Ibrahim, 2014). Arguably, research on internationalization in higher education (HE) tends to examine

issues at the organizational or national level rather than the daily practices of academic staff (Sanderson, 2004). Furthermore, the majority of articles about internationalization and faculty address internationalizing curriculum or transnational research collaborations by faculty (Kehm & Teichler, 2007) rather than faculty perspectives (Trice, 2003) or

instruction and engagement with international student populations (Sawir, 2011).

This paper argues the teaching of international students in an increasingly internationalized higher education (HEI) setting has been grossly overlooked and under-theorized (Arenas, 2009; Cao, Li, Jiang & Bai, 2014; Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Viète, 2009; Robinson-Pant, 2009). This is not to say that the field of international student experience has been ignored; in fact it is quite the opposite. The scholarship has focused on students' experience, namely individual adjustment, such as linguistic competence (Phakiti, Hirsch, Woodrow, 2013; Sawir, 2005; Wright & Schartner, 2013; Zhang & Mi, 2013), academic achievement (Baik & Greig, 2009; Berman & Cheng, 2001; Bertag, 2007; Ladd & Ruby, 1999), and social/cultural/psychological adaptation to their new context (Berry, 1997; Coles & Swami, 2012; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh,

Baker & Al-Timini, 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). However, individual adjustment, including academic achievement, differs from teaching and learning and classroom processes of instruction and engagement. In this sense, adjustment often refers to the fit between the students and the academic context (Berry, 1997), and achievement is typically measured through assessments cumulating to GPA (as seen in Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999). On the other hand, teaching refers to attitudes (Sawir, 2011), methods and pedagogical approaches (Arenas, 2009), and specific techniques (Carroll & Ryan, 2005) that can enhance student engagement and learning. Few would question the role that instruction plays in learning, yet there remains a conspicuous gap in the scholarly research on the very important topic of effective teaching practices for an increasing international student population.

This paper reviews the sparse literature on IS T&L. It argues that the topic has largely been framed as a language issue. This is problematic for two reasons:

- 1) doing so conflates linguistic proficiency inappropriately, equating language skill to content-based knowledge;
- 2) it frames learning challenges as problems that IS should solve alone and independently from their disciplinary program.

Next, the limited empirical research on faculty perspective on IS T&L is discussed confirming earlier observations that pedagogic appropriation has largely been an individual matter and an ad hoc 'lottery' system as to how IS needs are met (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Sanderson, 2011). In attempting to understand the absence of research interest and corresponding institutional policy on IS T&L, the discussion turns to the greater discourse surrounding the internationalization of HE, namely the ambiguity at higher levels of university administration on how to internationalize their institution. This includes challenges to faculty engagement with HE's internationalization initiatives, and the greater issues of cultural norms and beliefs.

## THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN IS LEARNING

Overwhelmingly, the research on international student experience in Western higher education has focused on the role of language as the primary challenge to academic learning/achievement (e.g. Sawir, 2005; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Hyland & Ramia, 2012). Moreover, language proficiency is conceptualized as an issue for IS to solve alone and master before entering the host institution (Guo & Chase, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Viète, 2009). At the outset, such a view is problematic in that it fails to recognize the role of the host

context in facilitating or discouraging language learning (Duff, 2010; Morita, 2004). Consequently, this trend, termed the 'fix the student' approach (Ryan, 2011), assumes that IS should be linguistically up to par to compete academically with domestic students, typically native-speakers, and that faculty and the institution should not have to accommodate linguistic difficulties. Supporting the 'fix the student' approach are countless studies that emphasize the cause, nature, and solution, including IS's previous educational background, personal characteristics, inadequacies of existing measures of language assessment, and remedial language programs (e.g.; Sawir et al., 2012; Phakiti et al., 2013).

Clearly, language barriers impact academic learning and achievement. More specifically, language difficulties manifest in listening and oral communication, lack of knowledge of local contextual references, inadequate vocabulary, and the struggles of academic writing (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000; Sawir et al., 2012; Singh, 2005). Ultimately, this requires additional time and effort from comprehension to production in the constant translation from target language to native language (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). To prepare incoming IS for the academic and linguistic challenges inherent to higher learning, universities typically rely on standardized language assessments such as IELTS or TOEFL. A wealth of research supports the use of

standardized tests as predictors of linguistic proficiency for academic achievement (Feast, 2002; Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999.); conversely, other studies have shown such tests are inadequate predictors of student success whereby meeting the minimum required score may entail significant struggling to maintain a satisfactory grade point average (Uysal, 2010; Bretag, 2007) and can cause considerable concern for academic staff (Trice, 2003; Robertson et al., 2000; Bretag, 2007).

However, the intricate relationship between language proficiency and learning is often oversimplified to linear cause-effect dynamics. As Berman & Cheng (2001) demonstrate in their comparison of native-speaking (NS) undergraduate students to their non-native speaking counterparts (NNS), NNS were able to achieve comparable GPA's despite perceived linguistic barriers. Berman & Cheng hypothesize NNS overcompensated for their linguistic challenges by studying harder, hence dispelling the tendency to automatically reduce academic learning and achievement to linguistic proficiency. Equally problematic is the view that language should be mastered, preferably, prior to commencing the course, or outside of the program of study. Many continue to hold the view that language difficulties interfere with disciplinary learning, and more importantly, that it is not the responsibility of departmental faculty to teach language as they are not trained to

deal with the language challenges of IS (Andrade, 2010; Robertson et al., 2000; Sawir, 2011). These beliefs trickle into classroom practices, leading Ryan & Viète to argue that all too often lecturers dismiss IS contributions in class, “not bothering to make the effort to understand their clumsy English, or to risk taking the conversation into unfamiliar territory” (2009 p. 306).

### INSTITUTIONAL (NON) RESPONSE

With a few notable exceptions, such as Carroll & Ryan's seminal text, *Teaching International Students'* (2005), this glaring oversight has continued across the academic community. One reason for the minimal scholarly interest may simply lie in the belief that a problem did not exist, or, at least, does not persist. For example, the 2013 Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) report on international education in Canada shows that 91% of IS in Canadian HE institutions were satisfied with their educational experience, with 96% reporting that they recommend Canada as place to study. Perhaps these positive reviews suggest that the current state of teaching and learning is working well, thus giving HE administrators little concern on the matter.

Moreover, increasingly IS were found to be equally successful academically as their domestic student counterparts (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Morrison, Merrick, Higgs & Metais, 2005; Kelly, Moores

& Moogan, 2012), again giving HE administrators little reason to re-examine their teaching practices. However, these encouraging trends should be taken with caution: while IS may be academically on par with home students, IS reported greater adjustment challenges (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999; Ladd & Ruby Jr., 1999; Berman & Cheng, 2001) and a longer adjustment period (Kelly et al., 2012). Thus, while IS may face greater challenges in the transitional phase of adjusting to their context, language develops over time (Zhang & Mi, 2013; Wright and Schartner, 2013), and gradually IS will acquire the requisite skill to succeed in their studies (Kelly et al., 2012). A wealth of research has been devoted to addressing adjustment challenges and reducing the duration of the transition phase for incoming IS (e.g. Andrade, 2006). This research suggests continuous language support (Sawir et al., 2012), structured interaction with domestic students (Leask & Carroll, 2011), and the development of local social networks (Guo & Chase, 2011).

### THE ROLE OF FACULTY IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TEACHING AND LEARNING

Growing awareness of the challenges IS face has turned attention towards improving teaching practices. In this sense, many HE institutions have offered practical teaching tips and techniques to enhance IS T&L. For example, the University of Michigan through their Centre for Research on Learning and

Teaching offers a website outlining pedagogical tips and strategies (<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/internationalstudents>). Similarly, the University of Melbourne's "Teaching International Students: Strategies to Enhance Learning" (Arkoudis, n.d.) directly addresses areas of concern including language use, classroom participation, and assessment methods. In spite of these efforts, still remarkably few studies have explored this connection theoretically and empirically (Arenas, 2009; Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Viète, 2009). As such, Ryan (2011) is correct in commenting that

the research tends to be disparate and lacks a conceptual framework to underpin and transform research and practice. There is a paucity of evidence-based and theoretically-informed work and research continues to be small-scale, scattered and a-theoretical (Huisman, 2010) and is fraught with mixed messages (Caruana & Spurling, 2007) (p. 638).

Recognizing this critical gap in the scholarly literature, Cao, Li, Jiang & Bai's (2014) quantitative study explores the relationship between faculty attitudes, teaching practices and learning outcomes. Findings show a strong correlation between instruction, learning, and achievement, hence leading the authors to advocate for a greater focus on pedagogy. From a student's perspective, teaching style, language proficiency, and

assessment measures directly impact students' academic success. Accordingly, instructors should adapt course materials and instructional methods to meet IS needs (Leiber, Wells, & Bond, 2008). Su's (2012) case study of visual approaches to teaching business modules further demonstrates how modified instructional practices can address language challenges and enhance student learning. Empirical support for the effectiveness of modified instruction on learning outcomes confirms the theoretical presumption that teaching practices impact IS academic achievement, and that faculty need to be more considerate of the unique learning styles and challenges faced by IS (Robertson et al., 2000).

### A HODGE-PODGE OF MIXED MESSAGES

Despite the growing presence of IS in the classroom, interestingly not all faculty have made changes to their teaching. Sawir's (2011) survey of multi-disciplinary faculty at an Australian university found only 66% of respondents believed they modified their teaching to accommodate IS. Conversely, 34% did not feel they had made any special accommodations for IS, their reasoning being that due to the nature of the subject taught, no changes were required. Further analysis shows departmental difference, with arts faculty most likely to adjust their role as a teacher (81%) and engineering least (59%). Similarly, arts faculty were most

likely to adjust teaching material and curricula (62%), while only 28% of engineering faculty reported doing so. Sawir's findings are revealing particularly for faculty in hard science disciplines who believe that not much adjustment could, nor should, be made in their teaching.

Arenas' (2009) research provides equally provocative findings regarding IS teaching attitudes and practices. Arenas' qualitative study found that teachers adapted their teaching approaches to match the perceived needs of IS, thus leaning towards a knowledge transmission teacher-centred approach that focused on teaching for formal assessment rather than exploratory student-centred learning and inquiry. In other words, instructors emphasized factual knowledge, aimed to present material in a clear and explicit manner, and even risked oversimplification of the content to ensure that students comprehended the material in order to adequately perform in-course assessments. Such findings may be problematic for educators who advocate for increased IS engagement in the teaching-learning process. For example, pedagogical considerations for IS T&L tend to emphasize strategies that involve IS in the learning process, value IS knowledge and contributions to the classroom environment, and make IS feel like valued members of the academic community (Carrol & Ryan, 2005; Viète & Ryan, 2009).

Clearly, the mixed findings presented above reinforce the call for greater attention to the state of IS T&L in HE. Moreover, they lead to important questions: what constitutes effective IS T&L? And what can institutions do to improve the teaching and learning experiences for both staff and students? In response to the first question, Sawir's multidisciplinary study (2011) reaches an interesting conclusion: despite disciplinary difference, the tendency to modify teaching to accommodate IS rested on the individual characteristics and circumstance of the lecturer. Simply put, faculty with an international background either as ESL speakers or having overseas experience were more sympathetic to the needs of IS. Perhaps, IS T&L issues relate more to attitudes than to content, discipline, or pedagogy.

Naturally, student perception is essential in defining good teaching. In this sense, most of the research reviewed emphasizes the need for teachers to be welcoming and respectful (Robertson et al., 2000; Andrade, 2010; Ryan & Viète, 2009; Sovic, 2013; Nieto & Booth, 2009). An encouraging attitude is fundamental as “teachers mediate certain values and attitudes in their teaching either consciously or unconsciously” (Jokikokko, 2009, p. 161). Students can feel a teacher's attitude and, for IS, this is a main factor in fostering a sense of welcome, belonging, and acceptance in the host university, which are all fundamental values for effective teaching and

learning (Mattison, 2010; Nieto & Booth, 2009).

What can institutions do to improve IS T&L? This discussion turns to the discourse on internationalization and organizational issues within HE administration. The following section situates the lack of scholarly interest in IS T&L in the broader discourse and debate surrounding the internationalization of HE.

### AMBIGUITY AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Turning to organizational issues, it is important to begin by reviewing a widely cited definition of the internationalization of HE as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 1994; Knight & de Wit, 1997). Based on this definition, we can see that teaching and learning are only one aspect of internationalized education. In fact, concern regarding IS T&L may be lower on the priority list for university administrators and faculty alike: the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) survey found that 69% of Canadian HEIs endorse the incorporation of an international dimension at their institution, with 72% reporting initiatives to internationalize the curriculum. However, a closer look at support for the varying activities related to the internationalization of curriculum shows that providing scholarships for outgoing student

mobility is popular (87%), and coordinating activities to develop students' international perspectives into classroom learning was also positively received, endorsed by 82% of participating universities. However, integrating international students' experiences into learning received less support (53%), and providing professional development to enhance the integration of international/intercultural dimensions into teaching, a mere 44% (AUCC, 2014). Amid the array of activities and opportunities to internationalize curriculum, there is significantly less concern for improving classroom teaching to meet the needs of a diverse IS population. Arguably, this is indicative of a reluctance to “opening teaching and learning to change, to finding innovative ways of changing and adapting” (Webb, 2005, p. 110). As such, the roles, beliefs, values, and attitudes of HE administrators and faculty regarding this situation need to be explored.

It would be naïve to decontextualize the issue of IS T&L from the greater discourse in the literature surrounding the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEI)s, “which is widely influenced by market discourse and values of profit and profile” (Haigh, 2008; Blossmann & Miller, 2008; Toyoshima, 2007) as cited in Al-Youssef (2013, p. 62). Educational quality and academic reputation are at the heart of IS' decision to study abroad. 78% of IS attending Canadian institutions reported Canada's academic

reputation as an important factor (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2013). Likewise, quality of education was deemed important or essential by 75% of respondents (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2013). Logically, it follows that IS select and attend overseas universities with the expectation of learning skills and knowledge in a context reputed for a commitment to rigour, quality, and excellence. Not surprisingly then, university administrations and staff may feel there is no need for improvement. Instead, they may feel obliged to continue to provide their educational services as is, their rationale perhaps being that incoming students have made an informed decision to select their institution based on its educational quality.

Other scholars have taken a more political view, pointing to blatant tension between economic and educational rationales for HEIs where aspiration to achieve high-profile standing and reputation is necessary to attract larger IS enrollment, to the detriment of creating an inclusive academic and social environment open to and accepting of the diversity IS bring (Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Viète, 2009). As Al-Youssef comments, at the administrative level, the result is a clear divide within the university structure between management concerned with recruitment and income generation, and faculty with teaching responsibilities (2013).

In the context of HE, it is not surprising that teaching responsibilities have been overlooked, given the privileging of research achievement over teaching excellence. To further complicate the matter, minimal faculty interest in internationalization of the curriculum and in broader internationalization initiatives may be attributed to pragmatic considerations. In simpler terms, it is not that faculty members are directly opposed to internationalization initiatives, rather that their engagement in and contribution are frequently unrewarded (Hawawini, 2011).

Yet, in this argument there seems to be a conspicuous oversight regarding professional development related to IS T&L. For example, Childress (2010) lists incentives to encourage faculty involvement to internationalize the curriculum. Included are numerous travel grants to promote cross-cultural and international research, endowments to bring distinguished international scholars, curriculum integration initiatives both to integrate study abroad into their courses and to develop collaborative learning/research, and grants to faculty to design courses that have a significant portion of international content. Not included in the list of rewarded activities is professional development to improve classroom instruction of IS. Thus, in the demanding role that HE faculty hold, teaching excellence is but one component.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCE REVISITED

Aside from the practical demands of HE faculty, the issue of culture and cultural openness to change needs to be considered. Scholars in critical education have described the internationalization of Western HE as Anglo/Euro-centric, set in preserving the status quo of Western academic tradition through a unidirectional supply and demand chain (Marginson, 2013; Rizvi, 2010; Ryan, 2011). In other words, students travel overseas to attend a Western university for its superior value. Embedded in this perspective is the view of IS as ‘privileged’ to attend their Western HEI, thus justifying the demands on IS to adjust to HEI norms and practices. For example, IS are expected to acquire the requisite language proficiency to participate and excel in their program of study. It is the IS’s responsibility to ensure her or his language proficiency is up to par. Moreover, language learning should occur outside of the disciplinary classroom as linguistic barriers interfere with classroom instruction, and many faculty do not feel it is their responsibility to adjust their instruction to meet the unique needs of a minority group.

Although Western HEIs are beginning to explore how they can better respond to their more diverse student population (Robinson-Pant, 2009), Ryan argues that reforms tend to do more of the same, i.e., offer additional learning-oriented services that will enable IS to better

adapt themselves to the university's requirements rather than engage in bilateral transformations whereby HEIs are also expected to change themselves to fit an increasingly IS population. In addition, Ryan (2011) contends that this approach is problematic in that it gives outdated advice and stereotypes IS as different and deficient from domestic students. Al-Youssef's (2013) qualitative study on HE management views on internationalization shows that "IS's learning styles and attitudes to academic studies and social life is packed with references to 'us' and 'them' clearly emphasizing difference...(p. 60). Scholars (e.g. Grimshaw, 2011; Ramachandran, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Robinson-Pant, 2009) have long argued for a move away from these dangerous binary views. As such, some have come to question the role of culture in shaping IS research (Grimshaw, 2011; Holliday, 2005; Ryan, 2012). Holliday (2005) makes this point clear: traditional views of IS as different from domestic students based on "the standard large culture approach is outdated and we can't make generalized claims about IS, doing so is still ethnocentric and discriminatory because it denies individuality" (p. 30). As Sovic (2013) suggests, the recent fixation with apparently different pedagogic traditions has perhaps run its course. Nevertheless, attention and concerted effort are needed to better address the needs of international students in the classroom.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS: AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE OF LEARNING**

Arguably, moving away from cultural stereotypes does not dismiss the relevance of culture. One way to address the issue of culture is by recognizing that culture is not static; just as individual students have diverse cultural backgrounds, Western HE has its own unique culture, and this culture is also changing. As such, Robinson-Pant (2009) proposes the idea of changing academies which rejects the view of HE as static institutions with polarized views of home vs. host universities. Recognizing that culture is fluid and changes through interactions with other cultures, Ryan (2011) advocates for a transcultural approach that responds to new teaching and learning conditions in HE. Thus, a transcultural approach encompasses

the creation of culturally inclusive teaching and learning environments at the level of the classroom, in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches, through to epistemological plurality of the knowledge base. In short, universities need to take a new stance, one that moves beyond interactions between cultures with one culture positioned as more powerful and dominant, to a new stance which arises from mutual dialogue and respect amongst academic cultures and knowledge traditions and results in new learning, knowledge and practices (Ryan, 2011, p. 635).

Ultimately, a transcultural approach calls for a shift in values, attitudes, and practices within HE whereby rather than focus on how to mold incoming IS to fit the institution, HE administrators and practitioners consider their own potential for change.

On a practical level, faculty professional development should also focus on the development of strategic and informed practices to improve IS inclusion and engagement in classroom learning. Leask & Carroll (2011) call for direct intervention from HE administrators to ensure teaching staff are actively promoting intercultural learning in their classes. In other words, HEIs need to be more proactive in guiding faculty through the internationalization process rather than just "wishing and hoping" that benefits for IS and domestic students will spontaneously emerge. Strategies proposed by Leask & Carroll (2011) include the implementation of curriculum reform beginning at the first year of study in order to develop positive pre-dispositions towards intercultural communication. Additionally, continuous faculty training and assessment are necessary to ensure pedagogically sound curriculum design and management of tasks and activities. Finally, similar to Grimshaw's (2011) recommendation for intercultural education, professional development for faculty and administrators on intercultural engagement is fundamental to raise

awareness of, and dispel, stereotypes surrounding IS.

Thus, for individual faculty members, becoming a more inclusive teacher may go beyond a self-proclaimed shift in attitudes; it may also entail ongoing pedagogical training and the adoption of novel teaching practice. ‘Wishing and hoping’ that a transformation in attitudes and practices will just emerge organically is perhaps naïve. Successful implementation of measures aimed at creating transnational learning environments requires clear institutional directives backed with practical support. As the research shows, without direction at the administrative level, meaningful developments in IS T & L are likely to be based on well-intentioned individual faculty members drawing on their personal experiences, thus resulting in sporadic efforts and ad hoc outcomes (Sanderson, 2011). Clearly, this is not enough, especially when universities boast of their commitment to prepare their students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to succeed in an increasingly globalized world (Sanderson, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

This paper argues that IS T&L has been overlooked, and this

is problematic in that teaching and learning lies at the heart of education. To explain this gap in the research, three streams of literature are reviewed. First, in terms of approaches that focus on the student, the vast scholarship has concentrated on language barriers as impediments to academic learning. In response, this paper argues that this approach conflates language as the primary factor turning attention away from what may be happening pedagogically in the disciplinary classroom. The second stream explores research on teaching IS where empirical studies are sparse and collectively inconclusive. Finally, the discussion connects to broader discourse surrounding the internationalization of HEI. Here, competing views for the internationalization of curriculum leads to non-alignment in policies and practice to engage faculty in IS T&L professional development. Furthermore, ideological values to uphold Western academic tradition reinforce a divisive “us” and “them” mentality, in the end devaluing the diversity IS bring to the classroom.

Where does this leave IS T&L research? Much is left to be done.

While there is growing concern about the quality of IS T&L, Ryan comments that this disconnect persists between

academic research and “the real world dilemmas and challenges facing those dealing with the increasing number of international students” (2011, p. 637). Not surprisingly, even though there is a widespread impetus to internationalize HE at the policy level, little has changed in terms of T&L. Simply put, change in pedagogy, practice, and truly embracing diversity in the HE classroom is, unfortunately, very slow to happen (Singh, 2009; Turner & Robson, 2008).

Thus, it is negligent for institutions of higher learning to continue to leave change up to chance. Instead, clear directive at the policy level in HE is required to systematically transform Western universities into transcultural learning environments where universities are “not just institutions of learning but *learning* institutions” (Ryan, 2011, p. 635 italics in original). Given that Canada is seeking to double IS enrollment within the next decade, IS T&L needs to be pushed up on HEIs’ priority list to ensure the highest quality of education possible... for all.



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