

ADAPTING TO CANADIAN LEARNING AND TEACHING STYLE: THE INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

In this paper, some of the challenges experienced by international graduate students as learners and as teachers in Canada are examined.

An international learner faces unique challenges such as language difficulties, communication barriers and challenges in group-work with domestic students. Reasons behind these difficulties are scrutinized and teaching strategies to help international graduate students cope are suggested.

When hired as teaching assistants, international graduates also encounter challenges in adapting to the teaching demands of their new environment. Methods to enhance their confidence, their ability to plan interactive lessons and their understanding of assessment in the host institution are discussed.

In conclusion the benefits of having an international experience both as a teacher and as a learner to enter successfully the academic job market are outlined.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1) INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES:
WHERE DO CHALLENGES LIE FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS?
- 2) LITERATURE OVERVIEW ON THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE
- 3) HOW TO FACILITATE LEARNING OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS?
 - A- Accommodating language difficulties
 - B- Acknowledging differences in communication styles and learning strategies
 - C- Group Work: fostering a collaborative environment
- 4) HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL TEACHER IN CANADA?
 - A- Gaining confidence in delivery despite imperfections in English Language.
 - B- Getting used to the interactive teaching style
 - C- Providing appropriate grades and feedback to Canadian students
- 5) CONCLUSION: IS IT ALL NEGATIVE? ON THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING AN
INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT.

1) INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES:

WHERE DO CHALLENGES LIE FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS?

Canadian campuses have become increasingly international over the past few decades and this trend should be confirmed in the coming years as Canadian realizes the positive impact of cultural diversity.

This internationalization of Canadian universities is accompanied by a substantial set of challenges for students and professors trained in a foreign country, as they have to adapt to the demands of their new educational environment.

Graduate students are often still attending classes to complete the requirements of their doctoral degree but are also offered teaching assistantships. This is particularly true for international graduate students who need the income associated with these teaching assistant positions (TAs) to afford their higher tuitions. Thus, non-native English-speaking (NNES) international graduate students, as well as international undergraduate students, are faced with specific difficulties when trying to succeed in the Canadian classroom, including difficulties with properly communicating their ideas, difficulties in actively participating during class and debating with their professors as well as barriers to succeed in group activities with domestic students. In addition, similarly to instructors educated abroad, international graduates experience a wide range of challenges associated with their teaching tasks. Communication can be particularly problematic for TAs who speak English as an additional language and have little teaching experience. In addition, TAs will likely have expectations for the students that are in line with the educational model of their home country but not of their host country. Finally, exams prepared by international TAs and the feedback they offer might be surprising for Canadian students.

Originally from France, I have studied in England, USA, South Korea and Switzerland before landing to Canada where I have been pursuing a doctorate degree in psychology (cognitive neuroscience) for three and half years. Being an international graduate student allowed me to experience the aforementioned difficulties and reflect on them.

In the first part of my paper, I will review current evidence, mainly from England and Australia, regarding the difficulties encountered by international students and I will explain how some of these difficulties may also apply to the NNES international graduate students studying in Canada. Subsequently, I will attempt to extract the main challenges I have encountered on my journey to success as a graduate student in Canada and review some of the existing research regarding the difficulties of international students in the domains that were problematic in my own experience. I will then elaborate on what can be done by instructors to facilitate learning of international students, taking into consideration their special needs. In the third part, difficulties I experienced as an international TA will be reviewed and guidelines to overcome these difficulties will be suggested, based on the literature. Finally, I will try to make the case that developing cultural sensitivity is necessary for graduate students who want to become successful academics given the mobility required to become professor and the always increasing number of international students all around the world. Thus, international graduate students having developed such a cultural sensitivity during their training could actually be strong assets of tomorrow's academia.

2) LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE ACADEMIC CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY INTERNATIONAL (GRADUATE) STUDENTS ¹

Close to 3 million students study abroad each year. The United States welcomes the largest number of these international students (750 000) followed by England (350 000) and Australia (300 000). However, England and Australia have a higher overall proportion of international students in their universities (15% and 20% respectively) than the United States (4%). In contrast to these three countries, Canada only welcomes approximately 100 000 international students each year. Additionally, international students are majoritarily from China, where the capacity of universities is too small for the demand. Thus, it is not very surprising that most of the research done on the challenges faced by international students was done in England and in Australia and that the group of international student that was studied was often mostly Chinese. In spite of these restrictions, previous research has been able to outline the major challenges encountered by international students in English speaking universities.

The first type of challenge that has been consistently reported among NNES international students is a difficulty expressing their thoughts in a language that is not familiar to them. Despite a good conversational English (international students have to take an entrance exam to verify their English skills), in the classrooms, most students struggle to express their ideas orally and in a written form (e.g. Schmitt, 2005; Zhang & Mi, 2010).

The importance of language skills for international students extend beyond the classroom, as international students' confidence in using the English language is a

¹ Most of the challenges reviewed in this section are not specific to international graduate students: they are experienced by undergraduate students as well.

predictor of their sociocultural adjustment. Social integration in their host environment is a second area of challenge for international students who often have difficulty “fitting in” the country where they study and make meaningful relationship with domestic students (e.g. Rientes, 2012; Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2005).

Difficulty in communicating with national students also reveals itself in challenges with group work. Differences in approaching group work, interacting and sharing thoughts have left both international and domestic students frustrated when attempting to complete group projects, unless strategies are put into place to avoid or control the affective reaction inevitably arising when working with individuals from another culture (e.g. Turner, 2009; De Vito, 2005).

In addition, international students report difficulties in communicating with their professors (and, for international graduate students, with their supervisor). Students are not necessarily used to challenge the ideas of their hierarchical superiors (i.e. professors/supervisors), as it is perceived as offensive in certain countries where respect for hierarchy is an important value. International students can be very subtle in the way they express their disagreement, which can lead to misunderstandings. They also don't participate as much as national students, not because they are unable to come up with their ideas or think critically but they have been educated in countries where one should talk *once the knowledge is acquired* and not *to acquire knowledge* (e.g. Kuhnen, 2012; Kingston & Forland, 2008).

Moreover, international students have expressed a difficulty in accessing support (financial, academic, personal) because it doesn't exist, because they don't know where to find it or because they don't feel that they have time to take advantage of the resources offered by their host institution (due to the amount of additional time they

need to do the readings and prepare the assignments with their deficient English skills). International students desperately need to improve their language skills, to be educated about the culture of their new academic environment and to meet domestic students interested in learning about other cultures (e.g. Kingston & Forland, 2008). Clearly, English and Australian universities anticipate this issue and have a very informative and interactive website for international students, from which most information can be accessed (e.g. University of Glasgow; University of Australia). Although this is changing, it was definitely not the case here, in the University of Waterloo, when I arrived, in 2009.

Finally, international graduate students specifically often lack the skills required by their teaching assistantship. They come with expectations regarding the respective roles of students and instructors that are often not aligned with those of the host institution. They do not understand the demands of their students and frequently experience a loss of self-confidence (e.g. Salinas, Kozuh & Seraphine, 1999).

Overall, Canada should take advantage of the extensive research done in two other English speaking countries (Australia and England) to become more attractive to international students. However, Canadian universities should remain careful in applying this research: their international students might encounter specific problems or might face less challenge in certain areas due to a different ethnic profile. In the following sections, I will outline the main challenges I (as an international student from France, studying psychology) have experienced during my integration as a student and as a teacher at the University of Waterloo and discuss them based on previous literature.

3) HOW TO FACILITATE LEARNING OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS?

A- Accommodating language difficulties

The English skills demanded in graduate school are high, even for domestic students. To be successful, graduate students have to come up with their own ideas and convince others (professors/advisors, committee/funding agencies, peers) that these ideas are worth pursuing, using a well-constructed argumentation. In order to find a position after their degree, they also should be able to write journal articles worth publishing and to initiate collaborations. In other words, when entering graduate school, one already needs to have strong language skills, not just to perfect them during studies. In my discipline, psychology, experimental results are way less important than the way these results are interpreted and presented, putting a strong emphasis on students' ability to express themselves. However, NNES international graduate students often have a limited and variable ability in using the English language. Thus, they have a serious handicap and sometimes struggle to go beyond the creative process (i.e they do come up with ideas but are unable to communicate them in a convincing way). It is especially frustrating (both for the student and for their advisors/professors) because these NNES international graduate students were often selected based on their previous achievements in their home countries, which they cannot reproduce, in their new environment.

As a NNES graduate student, the difficulty in expressing myself is definitely one of the most obvious challenges I faced. Part of this problem stems from a lack of English proficiency. For instance, in one class, I was invited to express my opinion about a scientific methodology: I had a very clear picture of what I wanted to say in my mind but when I spoke up, I could not find the proper English words and I felt extremely

frustrated. I could see that neither the professor nor my classmates could figure out what I was talking about. Writing remains painful. Indeed, I love writing in French and have always been praised for my literary skills and my creativity. By comparison, when using English, my written work is labour-intensive, frustrating and often negatively criticized. I feel amputated of one of my finest strengths.

My experience seems to be consistent with the existing literature on language difficulties of international students. Indeed, Zhang & Mi (2010) found that Chinese individuals studying in Australia reported significant challenges in expressing themselves orally and understanding other's speech in their first two years. Writing difficulties, on the other hand, persisted above the two years mark. Not too surprisingly, the extent to which listening and speaking was problematic depended on how linguistically challenging the degree pursued was, engineering and mathematics students experiencing less difficulties than students studying education, for example. More than competence, confidence in one's communicative ability seems to play a crucial role in the adjustment of an international student to his or her host country as it has been shown to correlate with social and psychological well-being (Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2006).

As a result, it is essential for professors of multicultural classrooms to provide a learning environment allowing international students to gain both confidence and competence in oral and written English, using encouragements and constructive feedback. Carroll (2002) suggests that being explicit, articulating each consonant, speaking slowly and repeating when needed could improve the understanding of international students. However, it might be hard to implement such strategies in a large classroom, as Canadian students would be dissatisfied with the slow pace of the

resulting lecture. In that case, handouts can be extremely helpful to keep international students on track. It certainly was for me: I was always reading the textbook ahead of time, making comments on my handouts. Thus, when I went to class, I had assimilated most of the material already and could focus on the words pronounced by the professor. According to Schmitt (2005), writing skill deficiencies of international students stem from 1) few writing experiences in former educational system 2) a limited vocabulary (5 000 words compared to the 40 000 words mastered by a national student, on average) 3) poor grammatical knowledge. The author argues that a postsecondary instructor with a global audience should be aware of the language skills required for any given assignment and teach those skills rather than assuming students know them already. This is of particular importance given that successful writing strategies appear to differ from one discipline to another.

Although it is commonly understood that it is the international student's responsibility to seek self-improvement, instructors should keep in mind that mastering the subtleties of a new language takes years of effort. As a result, it is important for professors to acknowledge the challenges of international students regarding oral and written communication and to adapt their teaching strategies to the particular demands of these students. In addition, teachers should be informed about the services provided by their institution to help international students cope with their language difficulties so those who are particularly struggling can be referred to these services. For example, at the University of Waterloo the Writing Center offers English classes and editing sessions for international graduates, but, although I would have clearly benefited from them in my first few years of university, I just only discovered them.

B- Acknowledging differences in communication styles and learning strategies

International students can also experience difficulty communicating because they are not used to the active participation style valued by the Canadian educational system. In France, the difference between students and professor's status is more noticeable in the classroom. Lectures are delivered without interruption and there isn't any textbook or sources provided for further reading. If a student has a question, he or she should think about it carefully (to avoid wasting the time of the instructor and embarrassing him/herself) and ask the professor after the lecture. Professors dress formally and don't appreciate students who disagree with them. According to Hofstede (1986), these features are the signs of a large power distance/hierarchical society.

On the contrary, Canada is a small power distance/egalitarian society and professors actually expect students to be in some sort of conversation with them, especially in graduate school. Initially, it was very hard for me to debate ideas with my professors. For the longest time, I couldn't ask questions in the weekly seminar, for example. It was not that I didn't have questions but I was too nervous to do it in front of the departmental staff. I like debating with my fellow classmates but debating with a person, who is hierarchically superior to me, feels disrespectful to me. It seems that I am challenging his or her competence given that it would be perceived as such in my country. I eventually came to realize how critical it was that I express my disagreement with my supervisor when my opinion differed from hers. However, my disagreement style remained very indirect. I would say what I disagreed on but in a way that would not completely discredit my advisor's opinion. It often led to

misunderstandings, because direct communication is expected in Canada. It took me a lot of trials and errors before I managed to adopt a direct but non-offensive style.

East Asian students, coming from large power distance societies as well, experience difficulties similar to mine. They have traditionally been described as overly deferential, collaborative and passive, not fitting in the Western educational environment where critical thinking is an essential attribute of the learner. In accordance with Kuhnen et al. (2011), for Eastern students “the processes by which one acquires new knowledge is primarily internal and one can only [...] take a critical stand towards the learning material after one has achieved mastery over it” (p. 62) while, in the West, communication is used as a medium to acquire knowledge.

Although France is considered as part of the West, I clearly identify with the Eastern attitude toward learning. This indicates that a separation between an “eastern” and a “western” way of learning might not always be adequate. Previous research has also argued that high power distance societies were following educational philosophy of the Asian scholar called Confucius (551-479 B.C.) while the Greek philosopher named Socrates (469-399 B.C.) inspired low power distance societies. However, France, a high power distance society, is unlikely to have been influenced by the Confucian tradition (for historical and geographical reasons). Rather, the high power distance observed in France could have more to do with the respect for social hierarchies. Thus, there seem to be other possible reasons behind cultural differences in power distance index. For example, Kuhnen et al. (2011) found that although eastern Europeans had a Socratic tradition, they were less likely to use critical thinking than western Europeans because of their experience with Communism (hierarchically organized political system). Again though, “western” Europe encompasses countries

with different communication styles such as France and Germany. Therefore, it is critical that future research compare groups of students from different nationalities, resisting the temptation to make a priori classification. More generally, it is important to avoid generalizing and to remain careful with our mental model regarding such or such group of international students. For instance, despite the persistent stereotype surrounding Asian students, there are several reasons as to why it should be re-examined, according to Kingston & Forland (2008). Firstly, with their economy growing, Eastern societies are becoming more capitalistic. Capitalism, an economic system based on private ownership and individual profit, is influencing other sectors of societies such as education. As a result, in the East, attitudes toward knowledge are changing and some Western values such as individualism are incorporated. Secondly, even though learners from eastern societies have often been criticized for memorizing the lectures without understanding the content, research (Biggs, 2003) has shown that memorization doesn't have to be a passive phenomenon and can involve not only surface learning but also deep learning². Finally, it is unclear whether the difficulties experienced by individuals coming from large power distance societies actually impair their academic performance, given that their averages don't differ significantly from those of host students upon graduation.

To alleviate the challenges faced by international students coming from large power distance societies, Kingston & Forland (2008) suggest the development of a model called cultural synergy and according to which the educational system of large

² Deep learning is typically described as an approach to learning involving critical analysis of new ideas and linking to already existing concepts to create long term retention. On the other hand, with surface learning, students accept the information and memorize it as isolated facts, allowing only for short term retention.

and small power distance societies are valued equally and adjust to one another until integration is achieved. This model seems quite idealistic to me because it requires “mutual efforts from all participants to learn about, understand and appreciate others’ cultures and their interpretations of learning and reciprocally to learn with and from others” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2001). However, according to my experience, staff members from the host institution are not always willing to update their educational value system with new values. But even if they were, it would take time and training resources to enable them to reach cultural synergy in their teaching. For example, if the University of Waterloo wanted to develop such a model of learning, it would require not only to maintain the workshops helping international students change their assumptions about learning but also to develop workshops to train native professors to become sensitive to learning strategies of different cultures, slowly creating a bridge between the international students and their teachers.

In the meantime, to help international students cope, some universities such as the University of Southern Australia have developed guidelines, recommending that professors make the culturally embedded rules clear from the start and explain the reasons behind them through multiple media. According to Kuhnen et al. (2011), they should go as far as identifying expected types of classroom interactions and why they selected these interactions. The authors warn against a risk of confusing the lack of participation of international students as reflecting a lack of motivation or interest when it really reflects a cultural difference in communication style. I have myself been blamed repetitively for my lack of engagement in projects that I was actually really excited about. Patience and understanding are recommended as it takes time to shift one’s entire prospective on successful learning.

Finally Kuhnen et al. (2011) suggest the creation of special trainings for international students in which they would be taught about cultural differences in learning and what is expected of them in the particular country where they are studying. I think this would have been very helpful in my case and would have probably prevented multiple errors I made. However, the authors warn against a risk of stereotyping at such an early stage of research. Indeed, I agree that more research is needed before launching such programs. For example, scholars would need to uncover the multiple reasons that can lead a society to use a high power distance or a low power distance, taking into consideration more diverse student groups than they had done in the past.

C- Group Work: fostering a collaborative environment

As a student, a final difficulty I encountered had to do with working together with native classmates on a project. I noticed that my Canadian classmates were somewhat reticent in picking me as a partner, even if we were friends outside the classroom. It is understandable because, to prepare a successful presentation, I have to practice a lot more than they do. Thus, having me as a teammate represents extra work for them. They also worry about being negatively impacted by my poor pronunciation during a presentation or by my misinterpretation of a question. Corroborating empirical evidence (presented below), I myself prefer to work with other international students because they understand the extra work that is required and have more tolerance regarding the different possible ways to approach a question. Usually, I found that my Canadian classmates work differently than I do. I am more focused on researching the content of a project (existing literature, current breakthroughs) than in the

presentation of the project per se (organization of the paper, etc.) while my Canadian colleagues prefer to spend more time on the delivery of the project than on the research behind it. Initially, it was surprising and anxiety provoking for me because I wasn't sure my classmates would be able to answer the questions they would be asked about the project. Actually, they always answered well. Even though they didn't know all the details, their knowledge was sufficiently organized to provide a thorough response. Retrospectively, I think that we were complementary and that working together allowed for better results than we would have obtained working independently. We also learned a lot from each other and I now pay much more attention to the way I present my research than I did in the past. Nevertheless, it required hard work, much time and these collaborative projects with host students were not always enjoyable.

This experience is consistent with literature on cross-cultural team projects in the academic context. Students who participated in cross-cultural team projects experience significant levels of discomfort, challenges and stress (Turner, 2009; De Vita, 2008). When working in group, host students perceived their international teammates as unable to work individually, bad English speakers, poor leaders, slow and quiet while international students perceived their local peers as controlling, individualistic, aggressive, impatient and intolerant of those who speak English as a second language (Turner, 2009). Such clash seems difficult to address and it is. But it is also essential to take a step toward fixing these cross-cultural collaborations. Indeed, beside the financial advantage for the host institution of having international students, an additional potential benefit is to allow domestic students to develop intercultural competency, a skill that is very much valued in our globalizing world. It is

not sufficient to create some workshops aimed at educating local and international students about cultural differences in learning and interacting, hoping that theoretical knowledge is enough to make a change. If we want Canadian learners to develop skills in working cross-culturally, we have to put their knowledge to test with involving them in cross-cultural group work. This could also have tremendous advantages for international students. They could use these cross-cultural group work opportunities as a way to develop relationships with host students and feel more socially adjusted. They could also have “hands-on” experience regarding the appropriate local communication style. Finally, they could gain understanding and respect from host students by sharing the communication style that would be appropriate in their home country.

However, despite clear benefits to cross-cultural group work, international collaboration doesn't occur spontaneously in classroom with a diverse audience (De Vita, 2008; Turner, 2009). Indeed, in general, students tend to dislike group work because, when it is formally assessed, they worry that the resulting grade doesn't reflect their personal worth and that some members of the group (especially international students) bring the mark down as compared to what they would have obtained on their own. According to De Vita (2009), this is a false belief and this misconception should be made clear to students so they are more enthusiastic about engaging in cross-cultural group work. An alternative strategy used by Turner (2009) is to replace formal assessment of the group project by informal assessments. Unfortunately, in the particular case described by the author, it was not a frank success and removing the formal assessment didn't alleviate the challenges faced by local and international students in communicating, despite the project focusing on

intercultural management and having a clear learning objectives to enhance cross-cultural understanding. According to this article, one of the problems in international collaboration was the tendency for local students to perceive their own interactive style as legitimate and the interactive style of international students as pathological: they were only satisfied when foreigners started adopting behaviour similar to theirs. Even international students considered themselves successful only when they were able to adapt quickly to the group norms established by local students. Although assimilating to local interaction styles could be adaptive for international students, it doesn't help local students to develop cross-cultural sensitivity. In addition, if the characteristics of the local learner (individualism, strong leadership skills, high participation) are set as the gold standards; it puts international students who don't share these characteristics at strong disadvantage and impairs overall equality in the classroom.

Possible ways to enhance the overall success of a cross-cultural group work include designing tasks in which global skills are an advantage or use the development of cross-cultural skills as a learning outcome (Carroll, 2002), although it was shown not to be sufficient in actually promoting intercultural competency (Turner, 2009). I think rewarding students, who spontaneously engage in cross-cultural collaboration for what we know represents increased effort and time commitment makes a lot of sense. Indeed, Carroll (2002) makes the case that if what is assessed is the end product without any consideration for the way it was achieved and the difficulty of the task, it is difficult to motivate host students to work in international teams. Turner (2009), whose attempt to foster a positive atmosphere for cross cultural team work failed, listed possible improvements to his original strategy, including voluntarily alternating

the leadership role to different members of the group and using certain tasks relying less on English skills and putting the international students at advantage compared to the local students. Finally, De Vita (2008) recommended the usage of games at the beginning of a cross-cultural team work in which students try to generate stereotypes for another cultures before members of this particular culture attempt to break the stereotype. She argues that it allows opening a dialogue about true or imagined cultural differences between members of the group. She also invites students who are frustrated by another's behaviour to reflect, engage in communication and to imagine possible alternative scenario as to why the behaviour occurred.

4) HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL TEACHER IN CANADA?

A- Gaining confidence in delivery despite imperfections in English Language.

As a teacher, being a non-native speaker impaired my confidence dramatically. When teaching tutorials or classes, I was often looking for words when talking, and I felt like everybody could see it. I was sometimes mispronouncing some important words and I panicked that the students would miss this important information. Luckily, during a classroom observation for the CUT (Certificate in University Teaching) program, I was videotaped. When watching the videotape, I realized that students could not actually tell that I was indecisive about which words to use next. It was very comforting to see that it wasn't actually showing. In addition, it was clear that my mispronunciation didn't bother the students from the feedback I received. They only commented about my "cute" accent. I think this was a good strategy in making me feel more secure about my delivery.

Alternatively, Salinas, Kozuh & Seraphine (1999) has shown that a four day training workshop for new international teaching assistants addressing both communication and teaching skills boosted their confidence levels and their performance.

B- Getting used to the interactive teaching style

When I was lecturing, initially, I really did not appreciate to be interrupted by students or to witness they were eating or checking their emails during class. As I mentioned earlier, my country is a high power distance society, and professors have a very different status in the classroom. Although I felt that I should make an effort to provide more interactive lectures, I struggled with the idea for quite some time and I only really started appreciating these methods after taking a workshop from the CUT program called “interactive teaching activities” in which I learned a wide range of fun and easy to implement techniques. The think-pair-share activity, for example, is a technique consisting in setting time aside during lectures for students to think with a partner. This technique has multiple documented benefits, including developing critical thinking (McTighe & Lyman, 1988). However, in France, such activities would be considered as a waste of time for the student and perceived as an evidence of laziness from the professor (who did not feel like covering the topic him/herself). Although I am aware that these perceptions are erroneous (it definitely takes more time to prepare an interactive lecture than a plain lecture), conflicts between the French and Canadian perception of interactivity often arise when I am preparing a lecture. But I have learned to identify them and resolve them to fit the educational demands of my environment. Of course, if I was to teach in France, I would need to re-adjust to the local teaching style as neither the students nor the society would

appreciate my efforts in making a lecture interactive. I believe that it is important to develop not one template of teaching but rather a flexible template that is able to fit the society in which it is used. Overall, it is critical that instructors are sensitive to their audience and appreciate the context in which they are teaching. In his book, Gebhard (2010) reports the testimony of an international student who had to readapt to local teaching practices after years of education in North America and experienced significant levels of distress, feeling like the teaching strategies that he had worked so hard to acquire were not effective in his home environment.

C- Providing appropriate grades and feedback to Canadian students

A final area of concern has to do with formal assessments. In France, students are graded on a scale from 0 to 20. When students get 15 or above, this is an excellent grade but it is virtually impossible to get 20, because it is believed that students cannot reach perfection. However, it is very possible to get below 10 and even 0 if the work is really bad. The first time I was marking exams, as a teaching assistant, I, thus followed this rule. Fortunately, the instructor in charge of the course explained that no matter how bad it was, Canadian grades should never go below 50% and that the average should be around 75%. Although it might very well be an expectation specific to the psychology department, this rule, that seemed obvious to domestic students, was very surprising to me. Eventually I understood that it was just a different assessment strategy.

In addition, in France, students are very rarely praised, even if they are good. On the contrary they are harshly criticized for the smallest mistake they make. It is believed that the stick is more efficient than the carrot in helping students learn. On the

contrary, in Canada, students are used to being praised and they do not appreciate criticisms: the carrot is thought to be a more efficient learning motor than the stick. One instructor for whom I worked for during my first year in Waterloo was quite alarmed when he saw the comments I made on the exams and he explained to me that it was not appropriate in a Canadian classroom. Actually, I very much like the idea of praising instead of criticizing because I feel like students educated in this way are less afraid of failure (they don't get punished if they do fail) compared to students in my country and thus are more likely to be creative and to show their innovations than students would in France. Overall, I believe that the creation of a workshop in which the expectations of the host institution regarding assessments are explained to new international students would be beneficial. It is my hope that it will be developed in a near future. Regardless, instructors working with international teaching assistants (ITAs) should be aware that ITAs are less likely to ask for information regarding the good practices of teaching in Canada as they might come from a high power distance society in which such information is provided by the professor and where it is rude to ask questions to your hierarchical superiors (Jenkins, 2000).

5) CONCLUSION: IS IT ALL NEGATIVE? ON THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING AN INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT

In this paper, I have emphasized the difficulties faced by international students as learners and as teachers (for those graduates recruited as teaching assistants). In the first part, I have used my own experience as an international student to examine the challenges of foreign learners regarding English literacy, communication styles and group work. Possible options for the instructor to decrease the amount of difficulties

of an international student have been outlined and discussed in light of recent literature. In the second part, I elaborated on problems I encountered as a teaching assistant during the entire length of my doctorate. Namely, I faced a lack of confidence, an ambiguity toward interactive teaching strategies as well as difficulty with the local assessments and feedback style. I shared what helped me cope with these difficulties and offered alternative successful strategies that could be used, based on the literature.

Although dealing with the humongous challenges of learning and teaching in another culture is a hard, frustrating and even sometimes painful, I want to emphasize the positive impact it has at the personal level (what is life if not constantly adapting to new changing circumstances?) but also at an academic level. Indeed, having to adjust to a different educational system forced me to reflect on my own mental models regarding teaching and learning. I know that most of my original models were culturally embedded. But now, in addition to this original model, I have gained knowledge about different educational philosophies and practices as well as about the challenges faced by international students. I have more than one model to pick from and I can adapt to the environment in which I teach/learn. Having multiple representations of what constitutes good teaching and good learning is also an advantage because it allows me to recognize the qualities of some of my international students that would go unnoticed by a Canadian teacher who didn't spend time developing his or her cultural sensitivity. In the future, if we want to get closer to the ideal of cultural synergy proposed by Kingston & Korland (2008), we will need instructors with as many intercultural experiences as possible and an open mind in order to change the approach to education for the better. International graduate

students could play a crucial role in this academic evolution, given their experiences both as a foreign learner and as an international teacher.

In addition, to find a position as an academic, one often has to be competitive on an international job market. I would think that it helps to know which skill to emphasize depending on the country where we are applying for a job. Finally, having studied in many countries, I know for a fact that adapting one's mental model to a new educational environment becomes easier and easier with practice. This eventually makes the transition to completely novel academic institutions almost effortless for international students. Hopefully, in the future, research will look more into the strength developed by international students as a result of coping with their difficulties.

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