

Sociolinguistic Challenges Faced by Iraqi Graduate Students at U.S. Universities: A Case Study for Iraqi Graduate Students at University of Cincinnati

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Abstract

This study addressed the challenges encountered by Iraqi graduate students at both the Intensive English Program (IEP) and the regular academic degree programs at U.S. Universities. Using a case study approach, the study focused on five Iraqi graduate students studying at the University of Cincinnati to address those challenges and seek solutions that help both current and future students adjust to an American college campus culture. Two questions guided the research: 1) How do Iraqi graduate students perceive their challenges in a new setting with English as the medium of instruction for the first time, and 2) what social, psychological, and linguistic factors are behind those challenges. Study results revealed the linguistic, social and psychological challenges as experienced by the participants. This study is significant as it describes the types of challenges encountered by the students and offers recommendations to improve the practices of the intensive English programs and better meet students' needs.

Key words: Academic language, Content-Based second language instruction, Graduate students, Intensive English Programs

Cite as: Fahad, A. (2015). Sociolinguistic Challenges Faced by Iraqi Graduate Students at U.S. Universities: A Case Study for Iraqi Graduate Students at University of Cincinnati. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no1.28>

Introduction

The number of Iraqi students in U.S universities is increasing year after year. According to the *Open Doors Report* (2014) on international education exchange, Iraqi students are part of a growing number of international students enrolled in higher education. In fact, in 2004, the embassy in Baghdad announced a 38.8% increase in the number of Iraqi students studying in the U.S. A decade later, 1,074 Iraqi students were enrolled in U.S. universities for the 2013-2014 academic years. This rise in numbers has been fueled in part by an increase in scholarship opportunities. One mid-western university, the University of Cincinnati (UC), recently started receiving a considerable number of Iraqi graduate students as a result of three separate scholarship programs, funded by the Higher Committee for Education Development in Iraq (HCED), Ministry of Higher Education programs, and the Kurdish regional government scholarship program.

UC has developed a strong relationship with several Iraqi universities. Linkage programs, funded by external grants, have increased opportunities for Iraqi students to study at UC. Like other international students, Iraqi graduate students had significant challenges in adjusting to the American academic culture as well as in preparing for a smooth transfer from Intensive English Programs (IEP) to their academic degree programs. These challenges are usually associated with language difficulties leading to problems in intercultural communication and adaptation (Medved D., Franco. A., Gao. X., & Yang. F., 2013)

The Intensive English Programs (IEPs) at U.S. Universities usually adopt a sheltered form of English instruction in order to connect the language development skills with those of the area content. According to Cho & Reich (2008), sheltered instruction is the method of integrating language and content objectives in planning and implementing instruction for low English language learners. However, the IEP in this study does not follow a content-based English language instruction. Due to scholarship limitations, Iraqi graduate students are constrained by a limited period of time in the IEP, leaving them with limited English language preparation.

Iraqi graduate students face other socio-cultural challenges as a result of several historical factors. The disconnection from the international community for decades as a result of the last two Gulf wars and United Nations' sanctions on Iraq negatively impacted English language education and limited Iraqi students' exposure to the authentic target language. The author of this paper argue that the challenges students face preparing to use English in their content area is due to sociolinguistic and psychological factors, among which are a separation of language skills and content area language experienced in their IEP. The lack of connection between language and content in the IEP phase increases the linguistic demand of the content and requires more cognitive energy, which hinders students' academic language development.

The mismatch between the kinds of instruction offered during the IEP period and the academic language of the students' actual degree program result in low preparation on the part of the students and left them with linguistic, social, and psychological challenges. The study sought to answer two questions: 1) how do Iraqi graduate students perceive their challenges in a new setting with English as the medium of instruction, and 2) what social, psychological, and linguistic factors are behind such challenges? As students who choose to study in the United States sometimes find serious challenges adapting to the native level of English and the unique culture of their new surroundings (Kuo, 2011), likewise, some Iraqi graduate students suffer in their academic degree programs on US college campuses and some fail to attain satisfactory grades or drop out of their programs altogether. In exploring the experience of Iraqi graduate students, this study seeks to better understand the impact of these challenges.

The current study is significant in addressing those challenges and providing recommendations for stakeholders in order to better address the needs of those graduate students. The linguistic, social and psychological challenges that those graduate students face when they arrive in the U.S may obstruct their academic acculturation and their language socialization. These factors are closely related but distinct. Cummins (1984) differentiates between social and academic language acquisition where the former refers to the language skills used for social interaction and the latter includes skills needed for academic success such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating and inferring. As soon as Iraqi graduate students graduate their IEPs, they start to encounter those challenges as a result of the different cultures and values of both the language and the overall academic practices of typical American classroom.

The current study emerged from personal experience, as I came to the U.S from Iraq in 2012 to begin my doctoral program. Despite the fact that Iraqi graduate students already received considerable English as a second language (ESL) instruction in their home country, we still found many difficulties coping with the linguistic variations in the U.S., such as American regional dialects, colloquial expressions and many contextually specific terms, unknown prior to arrival in the U.S. Exploring student awareness of these difficulties, experienced during the ELS language focus, were vital to my study.

The study begins by presenting relevant literature and introducing the theoretical framework. Then the methodology and the research design followed prior to the data analysis and results. The study concluded with discussion and conclusion sections. The conclusion part included recommendations for future ELS programs for Iraqi graduate students.

Theoretical Framework

In Iraq, English language instruction starts at the third elementary grade. A flawed methodology in the teaching of English language in Iraqi schools has resulted in low English levels among Iraqi students. English language teachers are not given adequate training and the schools usually use the traditional outdated audio-lingual approach, which often leaves students uninterested. According to Liu & Shi (2007), the audio-lingual method has long been criticized in terms of language theory and learning theory. Further, practical results from the audio-lingual method fell short of expectations, leaving students less prepared to acquire communicative competence. As a result of this teacher-centered approach, student fluency in English remains low in Iraq. Recently, the communicative language teaching approach was accepted as a method for learning English in Iraq. However, observation of Iraqi classes revealed that this classroom interaction based learning strategy has not been widely implemented. According to Kalanzadeh, G., Mirchenari, N. & Bakhtiarvand, M. (2013), the lack of adequate teachers training program, a reliance on traditional teaching methods, classroom size and time available, as well as resources, are the main reasons behind the failure to apply the communicative language method. These same limitations apply to the contexts of Iraq EFL classrooms. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Education, students' performance in the examination of the third intermediate level for the year 2011, which witnessed the kick start of the communicative approach curriculum, was among the worst compared with previous years.

Receiving little quality English language instruction at home, Iraqi graduate students experience a gap between the content knowledge in their areas and English language knowledge. In this study, for instance, the Iraqi students involved already won a highly competitive scholarship and only top ranked students were accepted. Still, no consideration was given to English language skills; scholarship administrators assumed the students would learn the

language after they fulfilled their IEPs in the U.S. Furthermore the academic use of language in Arabic is different from its use in English and Iraqi students do not usually use academic English at schools. In fact, the academic language used in their first language is quite different from U.S academic language.

Though the model of instruction adopted in IEPs in the U.S is more learner-centered, there is still less focus on integrating content and language development skills. The result is that graduate students receive poor preparation to comprehend the content knowledge after the transfer from the IEP to the academic degree program. There is a difference between general survival English, and the English that learners use in their area content. Schleppegrell (2004) points out the difference between academic language and oral language, arguing that the language used in schools is a linguistic method of relating content, which can be expanded and developed with the students' discourse. Content-based second language instruction has recently been advocated for as an effective approach in the field of second language learning. Mohan and Beckett (2003) emphasize the importance of content-based language instruction for ESL students; coming from vastly different backgrounds, they are expected to know and understand complex subject matter that is being taught in English and to perform and understand the materials as well as native speakers. They believe that content-based language instruction is effective, since it provides meaningful communication about both content and international language development. This is in line with Krashen's (1994) call to support content-based instruction in his *Input Hypothesis* where he states that language is gained from broad comprehensive contact with second language experiences.

Thus, ESL students, in order to qualify for the use of English in schools need to socialize with academic registers appropriate to their fields of study. Socialization is more than a required process to learn social language; it is also a process related to the academic language. Duff (2010) discusses the term, "socialization into academic discourse." (p.174). Here the challenge that second language learners face is more interpersonal and relates to the different types of informal discussion and communication needed inside the classroom rather than the technical language of the students' area content. International students often find themselves not understanding this academic discourse which was defined by Duff (2010) as "forms of oral and written language and communication—genres, registers, graphics, linguistic structures, interactional patterns—that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalized, or ritualized, and, therefore, usually evaluated by instructors, institutions, editors, and others in educational and professional contexts" (p.175). The amount of anxiety experienced from coping with this socialization is even greater in the case of the Iraqi graduate students in the current study, whose English language skills ranged between basic and intermediate by the time they started their IEPs.

The amount of linguistics input Iraqi graduate students receive in IEPs needs to be both gradual and relevant to the learners' levels. Poor English language learning received in the home country and the inequitable practices that Iraqi graduate students experience in their IEP leave them less prepared linguistically and socially to start their academic degree programs at U.S universities. The fact that language and content integration is not properly implemented during this phase mixed with overwhelming cognitive demands and pressures to adapt culturally and socially to the new environment creates real academic challenges of sociolinguistic and psychological sources.

Method

This multi-case study explores the experience of five Iraqi graduate students who have already graduated from their IEPs and started their regular academic studies at UC. The students are currently attending different graduate academic programs, including sociology, pharmacology, architecture, and engineering. Case studies, according to Merriam (1988), are useful in providing researchers with an in-depth understanding of problematic situations, and their meaning for those involved. The problematic issue here is the great linguistic, social, and psychological challenges that Iraqi graduate students usually meet in their Intensive English Programs. Since I was one of the Iraqi students attending ELS, I had easy access to the students whom I selected for this study.

The participants come from different geographical areas of Iraq, including Baghdad, the capital, the South, and the Kurdish region of Iraq in the North. They also have different social status in terms of being married or single. Table 1 provides information about the study participants. By the time the data collection started, the students had already graduated from their IEP and started their regular academic degree programs. Graduating from the IEP was an alternative for taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test. All the students have attained their most recent degrees from Iraq and, for four of them, Arabic was the medium of instruction before they started their study in the U.S.

In the present study, Nunan & Bailey's (2009) call for data triangulation was considered and the data collection included a triangulation of methods—survey, followed by interviews and a collection of course artifacts. An online survey using *Survey Monkey* was used to gain general impressions about the student's perception of the challenges discussed in this article. Based on the responses for the online survey, ten open-ended questions were posed through a semi-structured interview. According to Dörnyei & Taguchi (2010), there is merit to open-ended questions, as they can provide broader richness about the topic and they also well serve when the range of the possible answers is not known. The method used intended to encourage self-reflection and critical thinking, as the aim was to uncover how each of the participants perceived the obstacles they faced in their academic programs in hopes of eliciting meaningful and thoughtful dialogue about their firsthand experiences without pressure or judgment.

Table 1

Participants' Background Information

pseudonym	Major	Social status	Degree	Note
Hani	Sociology	Married (live with his family of 5 in the U.S)	PhD	His first language is Kurdish and speaks little Arabic
Zak	Pharmacology	Single	Master	English was the medium of instruction in his school in Iraq
Jenna	Architecture	Single (her 6 year old child live with her)	PhD	
Munaf	Civil Engineering	Married (live with his family of 4 in the U.S)	PhD	
Sami	Mathematics	Married (his wife lives with him)	PhD	He did not continue the interview as he failed in his first semester and had to leave UC.

Data Analysis

Direct interpretation and the establishment of patterns, as suggested by Creswell (2012), were used in looking at single and multiple instances of the data. Correspondence among the emerging themes shows relationship between thematic categories. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a questionnaire was designed using *Survey Monkey* and sent to the five graduate students selected. Responses were obtained from four of the five students, as one student had failed his qualifying exam and had to leave the university. Next, thirty minute face-to-face interviews were conducted and transcribed. Interviews consisted of ten open-ended questions designed to elicit and unpack students' perception of the challenges that the Iraqi graduate students met in their Intensive English Language Program, and how this influenced their academic progress after they moved from the intensive English program into their academic degree programs. Further, the participants' real syllabus was also used as another source of data, along with the interviews and the online survey, in order to triangulate the data.

Results and Findings

Data from participant responses to the survey and the transcribed interviews was collected and coded into three themes, highlighting the three challenges reflected in the research questions: Linguistic, Social and Psychological.

Linguistic Challenges

Linguistically, most Iraqi students, except Zak, experienced English as the medium of instruction for the first time at UC. English study in Iraq, a secondary elective subject, focused primarily on grammar and forms. The exposure to the English language in US classrooms was a challenge despite graduating from an intensive English language program. Hanı, for instance, said that he faced several problems in this respect, such as difficulty in understanding idioms and the extra cognitive energy needed to comprehend the American native pronunciation. Hanı said, "It was difficult. Especially I face it two kind of problems. When I started my English language at ELS center, first was understanding idioms speaking idiom... idioms between Americans themselves and second one was the... their pronunciation...". Munaf agreed with Hanı, adding to it the challenge of the American accent and how this affects his complete understanding of the lectures in class. In addition, Munaf noted difficulty in understanding not only his teachers, but his American class mates as well. Participants repeated the key word 'uncomfortable' when talking about their experience with English as the language of instruction.

Zak faced less linguistic difficulty, as his school in Iraq uses English as the language of instruction. Still, he reported difficulty in coping with pronunciation, especially from non-American professors and the language encountered off campus. It seems that Zak was feeling more comfortable using the medium of English in his academic program unlike how he was in IEP. This supports the argument that a lack of language integration in content area classrooms would cause some sociolinguistic challenges. The English he experienced in his previous degree focused on content specific language, rather than basic interpersonal communication skills. It has also been noted that students face difficulty outside the classroom and in off campus social situations. They all noticed difficulty in understanding American accents in general and the African American accent in particular.

Jenna believes that her listening comprehension fluctuates between average, in campus and classroom interactions, to poor when she encounters situations off campus, especially in grocery stores. She also agrees that international students, especially Indians, are hard to understand. "...So, I think for the first time when I came here and the ESL it's a good experience

because the language that they use its academic language... But the problem that was on the groceries, on phone when I talk to them. Uh their... the accents, maybe the accents is different not academic accent uh.... also uh.... when I um.... started my academic courses it's about the teachers that not all the professors, they have not clear accents so some of them they are not native American..." Jenna also preferred written communication and assignment over oral communication because she would have more control on her grammar and style: "... maybe in the written assignments it's less [errors] because I have time to revise them and return back to them, but in the oral I can't so." Iraqi graduate students appear to be overwhelmed with the need to focus on intensive amounts of linguistic inputs, causing them to segregate themselves on and off campus and to be resistant in terms of using Arabic for note-taking.

Grammar is one of the major considerations students mentioned in both writing and speaking. Hani, when asked about how he corrected his grammar, said he consults a grammar book every time he has to write. Hani also said that he sometimes consults with his teachers and classmates to get feedback on his writing. He stated that the exchange of emails with his peers and professors helped him improve his writing in general and his grammar in particular. Munaf thinks that grammar is one of his biggest challenges, especially when he engages in conversation in and outside of classes. Peer feedback and email exchanges with professors were all agreed on as effective practices that participants rely on in dealing with their grammar in speaking and writing. All participants found it easy and more comfortable to ask questions through an online mode of communication, such as email. They noted that taking time to revise messages before sending emails brought peace of mind, compared to the tension and anxiety they experience when they communicate face to face with professor and American peers. They also benefited from the messages in their email, as they feel they gradually acquire the norms of writing in an American campus setting. Hani continued, "...way that helped me mutual and exchanging letters with the professors and my teachers and my classmate friends. Really this by this way I got...yeah good feedback and a good way of good writing and with answering their letters in such a good writing and like them. And not perfectly but at least right now I can send a letter to my professors like how like they send..."

It seems that all the participants believe grammar is a challenge and it caused them to think before they speak, resulting in a lack of fluency in their speaking and lack of accuracy in their writing.

Social and Psychological Challenges

The linguistic challenge itself seems to form a barrier between the Iraqi students and their American classroom peers. When asked about means of feedback on their grammar and writing, the answers were all related to a self- search. Hani for instance consulted a book, Munaf and Zak listened to news and conversation and later checked on them individually. They were less confident speaking in classroom, as they admitted feeling embarrassed and hesitant in asking their professors and peers for face to face feedback on their writing.. Hani's answer about the grammatical mistake revealed that he paused to think before he engaged in a conversation, less he produce funny grammar and style mistakes.

In their intensive English language program, students are expected to come to class five days a week from 8 am to 4 pm with mostly international students and overwhelming intensive homework and a strict grading policy. However, the participants believe that they benefited less from their ELS study in terms of being prepared to their academic study at the university. When asked about their experience with their ELS study, they all agreed that ELS provided less academic preparation. They thought that the flexibility of time they had in their academic study

was a relief for them and provided an opportunity to engage in social activities on campus and to study under less time pressure. The availability of options like Blackboard and office hours helps them to better manage their time and homework.

Like other new educational practices such as syllabus and Blackboard, students were also ill prepared for the more learner-centered approach encountered during the IEP period. Munaf, for instance, preferred whole class discussion, as it put him in a less threatening environment. Compared to the pair or group work, it also helps him get feedback and feel more confident to participate in class. When asked on whether whole class discussion was helpful for him he said “Yeah teaching method like all class discussion it is very important to me to enhance my language especially when I was not good and listening at my accent and grammar but sometimes I feel I'm worried to communicate during big mistakes. During grammar I am worried I may make this mistake so it's helpful though I am still worried.”

Participants agreed that group work provided a good platform to improve their English but they still believed that group work was challenging with regard to the focus that would fall on them to explain the topics. Zak believed that peer feedback was very helpful in improving his writing. The only chance that he had for this was when the professor paired him with an American class mate. Zak regretted that there were few chances to be paired with a native English speaker. Zak said “Actually I haven't experienced the peer or group work a lot because the majority of my classes are lecturing except one class which is immunopharmacology. It's in the form of a small group class and the format of the class is in the as presentations so I think if you want to improve your language this kind of classes will help you.”

According to Zak, pair work with native speakers is also difficult, due to the language and cultural barriers. However, this did not hinder him from signing up for academic and professional development events and activities. Hani thinks such events increase his network of professional people and provides an avenue to communicate and gain feedback from others, as he might be less embarrassed asking for feedback from outsiders than from the professor or the class mates. Jenna believes that the syllabus was important for forecasting both content expectations and the communicating the type of content knowledge that they will learn: “... it's benefit for to know what the kind of knowledge that I will get is.” This is again related to other options that students rely on to comprehend the material produced and eventually help them to manage their time, which is itself a cultural difference that they all needed to cope with in their new academic setting. Syllabus and schedule are new terms to most Iraqi graduate students.

Time itself carries cultural differences. In Western communities, time is more valued than in countries like Iraq. However, students liked the idea of a syllabus and the idea of having a full time-table for a given course. It provides a tool for them to manage their time and prepare for their assignments and also to understand the objective and the expectations of the course. An analysis of one course syllabus showed that Iraqi graduate students appreciate that they are given this document for every class. Most of them believe that syllabus is not only important to understand the expectation of the classroom, but is also beneficial in terms of understanding the assignments part. The description of the assignment provides a platform for them to eliminate any misunderstandings, as opposed to orally communicating expectations.

Jenna agrees that whole class discussion is the preferred model for communication inside the classroom, as she doesn't like to be the center of attention when tasks are given to students and also because she is not confident enough to interact with native English-speaker students. She said: “...[I] hesitate to share in the discussion because I see their accents is very good and um I'm less than them because I am international [and] this is the first time for me to share in the

English discussion.” The realization that students feel less valued in class had a major psychological effect on their motivation to study, as they feel that the language barrier hindered them. Jenna expresses this frustration, noting that she really wished to be like them in terms of using the language, not the content.

Group work, and pair work were considered effective by the students, but they find it is not easy to lead a group discussion. The group work offers a less pressing environment for the students to produce. Whole class is the least risk-taking situation according to them since it requires more listening and less speaking. According to Jenna, whole class discussion is helpful “because um... it's for it's encouraged and forced me too, because sometimes I want to share my question. I want to get the answer, so that's it's a little bit like force me to share. So I wanted to sometimes to understand something that uh the professor said but I don't understand it. So uh I ask him. When I ask him he answer me, so after that I have to uh return back to some point which encourage me to go to in this discussion and to help me step-by-step to overcome the obstacle of uhdiscussion on the speech itself.” This feeling of anxiety and discomfort associated with working in groups and pairs forms a psychological barrier that hindered students' effort to improve their English language skills.

The psychological challenge seems to prevail as students start adjusting to the classroom environment. Besides the demand of pair and group work and the intensive cognitive energy required to focus, students were also challenged with the note-taking skill. Note taking is required in a learner-centered classroom, but students found themselves overwhelmed by the low comprehension of the linguistic input in classroom. Employing alternatives, such as writing down the notes in Arabic and remaking their notes later at home and recording the class discussion in order to listen later were widely used by Iraqi graduate students. This shows how intensely challenged students feel in their programs. The combination of these three challenges resulted in feelings of anxiety, separation, and inadequacy. All the students gave the same impression when asked about their experience during ELS and academic study. According to Jenna, the ELS period was considered passive by most students, as they found out that they were given material not related to their academic study. Further, the lack of interaction with native English speakers and the intensive time they had to attend and fulfill long tedious homework were viewed as definite weaknesses. Jenna said, “The Language Institute that I attend. Uh we are all like um international students from Chinese from different parts of uh... ELS it's a little bit harder because there was like I have to attend the ALS like eight hours between eight and ten hours every day, even the Friday”

Discussion

The survey and interviews show that there are three themes for the challenges affecting Iraqi graduate students getting prepared for both graduating their IEP and starting their degree program at the University of Cincinnati: linguistics, social and psychological challenges. The three themes representing the challenges Iraqi students encountered in their IEP as well as their academic degree program seem interrelated. The social challenges, for instance, are caused mostly by the linguistics challenges represented by the struggle with the use of the target language on and off campus. Though students arrive in the US with a considerable repertoire of vocabulary and grammar rules, they find themselves thwarted by the use of English as the instruction language. There are also issues related to the grammar in context, American idiomatic expressions and accent. That was clear from their reflection on the intensive concentration they needed to have in order to understand expression new to them and also to understand North

American accents, which they were rarely exposed to before. Worse, they suffer more when they listened to English foreign accents from Indian and Chinese professors, as well as the African American accent.

The knowledge of the content language they studied at the ELS language center was not very relevant to their fields' content language. Miller (2011) realized this mismatch in the material given to students during their ESL preparation. This becomes a challenge that students encounter after finding themselves coping with a new register language related to their specific fields of study. Generally, students show frustration with the type of IEP program and realize the mismatch with their expectations. The scarcity of exposure to the native language speakers during this period, the intensive study time and homework load given during the ESL, accompanied by the struggle to acculturate in the new environment both socially and academically render them less motivated. Jenna, who was very expectant and motivated to arrive in the U.S and improve her English through study with native English speakers, found herself helpless while attending classes nine hours per day with grammar drilling and homework and no time to attend social events or professional development meetings.

Students were from different educational backgrounds and with different social status experiencing a new culture of the college and the new life-style demands. Academically, they needed to not only use the target language but also to adjust to factors new to them such as learner- centered, pair and group work, syllabus and so forth. The linguistic demand required in a learner-center classroom created a major obstacle for the students to show themselves as competent in their fields. Their frustration emerged from the fact that they were already considered top students in their home institutions. This was reflected by their achievement in winning a highly competitive scholarship to study in the U.S. The lack of fluency in using English in the classroom put them in embarrassing situations and shook their self-confidence. The students' resistance manifested itself in thoughts of dropping out and returning to their earlier zone of comfort. Generally, participants' experience in the ELS period was less favored. This is closely attributed to the fact that the content offered during this period was general in scope and had no relevance to the students' specific needs or content areas.

A closer look at these results showed that solutions to most of these challenges would be possible through some practices on the part of both the scholarship funding agencies in Iraq. Students need to be assessed by more than their knowledge of the area content knowledge in order to be given a scholarship to study abroad. Considering other parameters, such as good English language proficeincy and communication and interpersonal skills are essential. It has been substantially seen that most of the challenegs rooted back to the linguistic demand and the low English language level of studnets.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this work, The author presented the status of Iraqi graduate studnets as part of the international students community at the University of Cincinnati. Further, He addressed the main challenges those students encounter at U.S universities. The first question of this study is about how the students perceive challenges they face in their IEPs, as well as after they transfer to their academic degree programs. The students endured a mismatch between their expectation prior to their arrival to the U.S and the reality they experienced. This realization elicited through student responses to the interview suggest recommendations to different statke holders where student needs can better be met.

The second research question addressed the kind of challenges Iraqi graduate students faced. The study revealed that there are real sociolinguistic and psychological challenges in the process of preparing Iraqi graduate students in their IEP to start their academic programs. The frequency counts of the three themes in the data showed that those constraints affected all the students regardless of their English level and the sociocultural status. Students' frustration was mainly expressed about the level of their separation from the local students in the classroom setting and the academically challenging environment. Their self-perception as high achieving winners of respected and competitive scholarship programs in their home country was shaken. By the end of their programs, students worried about merely surviving with the least expected level of passing their courses.

This study has some recommendations to be suggested. For the Intensive English Language programs at the University of Cincinnati as well as in other schools in the U.S, it is important to consider a variety of factors in order to academically prepare international students in general and Iraqi graduate students in particular. The English only instruction method loaded with overwhelming intensive homework and drilling would yield results that counter the goals of the program. Ensuring an appropriate learning environment is something that the IEP programs need to pay attention to. Designing syllabi and classroom practices that ensure a balance of more area content language and survival English and providing more social events with more exposure to the native language are practices that would greatly improve both the language learning and the academic preparation. As for the degree programs department, they need to assess the level of English needs with advisors' recommendation on specific ESL courses as an elective courses for students to take as they start.

Special attention and orientation meetings with international students prior to the beginning of the semester would be helpful practices in the graduate programs. Professors' awareness of those students' experiences with English as the language of instruction for the first time will provide a groundwork to pedagogically set up plans and practices in order to have students able to gradually adhere to the learner-centered approach. Such practices as professors' involvement in assigning pair and group work rather than leaving it to the students, more professional development opportunities, and advice on using academic services such as writing centers are essential to achieve this aim.

The use of technology in the form of synchronous and asynchronous communication instead of face to face meeting is important. It has already been shown that students feel more comfortable communicating through emails and Blackboard, rather than engaging in a face to face conversation. Learners appear to shape a strong identity communicating through such platforms, meaning that more online communication will be beneficial to the students as they gradually adjust to the new challenging academic phase of their life.

This study has looked at the pressing factors challenging Iraqi graduate students' community at a U.S university. Although some studies have looked at either social or cultural aspects affecting international students' performance at U.S Universities, the combination of the three factors, social, linguistic and psychological, has not been addressed adequately.

About the Author:

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