

The Experiences of English as Second Language Students at Youngstown State University

Shantia Cox & Samantha Moore

Youngstown State University

### **Abstract**

This is a qualitative study created in the theory to benefit English as Second Language students at Youngstown State University. The researchers created and distributed a survey that was easily accessible for students. They also planned to conduct follow-up interviews for a more personal approach for those willing to participate. This study was conducted to answer the question, “What types of communications facilitate success in online learning environments for international students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) at Youngstown State University?” It was initially derived to develop a plan that would help both ESL students as well as their professors. The researchers developed a plan with an interest in the experiences in undergraduate ESL students. This plan was later manipulated in order to assess the experiences of both undergraduate and graduate students after the researchers were unsuccessful receiving volunteers. Initially, the researchers were aiming to have responses from six to ten participants. They only received responses from two individuals and this was not enough responses for sufficient and successful data collection. For those interested in conducting future research on this topic, the use of incentives and help from professors would be helpful in their endeavors.

*Keywords:* ESL, Social Learning Theory, Online Learning, International Students

## The Experiences of English as Second Language Students at Youngstown State University

### **Introduction**

This qualitative study will investigate what forms of communication help English as a Second Language (ESL) students succeed in the online learning environment. Considering that the world is currently gripped by a pandemic, many universities are increasingly moving to online learning as a safer alternative. This poses a new set of difficulties for ESL students who often deal with communication barriers already. In an article by Tan, et al. (2010), the authors discuss the concept of misunderstandings and obstacles being exacerbated due to a lack of social context cues and communication in online situations.

Kung (2017) provides recommendations for those working with international students online to help them succeed, such as considering the student's culture, experiences with online courses, the instructor's experiences with international students, and the instructor's online teaching experiences (p.480). Kung (2017) also found that it is in the instructor's and student's best interest to understand the students and their culture if one is to provide a better learning experience for them. For international students to increase their own success online, Kung (2017) recommended they connect with peers, complete assigned tasks, and be realistic about course expectations. Tan, et al. (2010) used a qualitative study to determine how ESL graduate students perceived online learning and found that ESL individuals had trouble with online courses because of language and cultural differences, but those with more proficient language skills and more time spent in the United States have a more positive attitude towards online courses. Lin and Griffith (2014) looked into how online learning can affect writing in a second language. They found that there are psychological, cognitive, and socio-cultural advantages that include things like enhancing writing skills, critical thinking skills and increased participation. Though

there are many advantages, there are disadvantages that are contributed from online learning like mechanical errors, discomfort, conflict and wasting time on technological problems. Bista and Foster (2011) found that ESL students having a place where they feel comfortable confiding in someone, assessing ESL students' transportation and entertainment needs, on-campus employment and scholarships for ESL students, culturally educating the community, and having an international retention office are all areas that are important in helping with the success of online ESL students.

Two theories applied to this research study emphasize how interaction with outside actors can influence how others learn to communicate, even with a language barrier. Communication accommodation theory is the adjustment of messages in reaction to others' communication styles (Curnalia, 2016). Social learning theory posits that people model their behaviors after the behavior of others (Curnalia, 2016). Both of these theories provide foundational knowledge worth considering when examining the barriers faced by ESL students in online learning environments.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In this study, the researchers will examine types of communications that facilitate success in online learning environments for ESL undergraduate students at Youngstown State University. The differences in languages have already presented learning challenges for ESL students and online learning has just added to the problem, including cognitive, social, psychological and technological difficulties. Regarding cognitive and social difficulties, Lin and Griffith (2014) found that ESL students pay less attention to grammatical accuracy and continuity in discussions, and that they experience a greater sense of detachment from their non-ESL peers, which led to feelings of frustration and misunderstandings. In terms of psychological difficulties, Lin and

Griffith (2014) found that ESL students have trouble communicating through online platforms because of a lack of non-verbal cues, facial expressions and body language, and the difficulty of expressing emotions virtually. There are also big issues related to technological difficulties, like computer failure and time being lost to issues related to technology. These problems are only exacerbated through the full transition to online learning because of the constant reliance on technology and the difficulty connecting with peers and instructors.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to find out what types of communications facilitate success for ESL students in online learning environments. Kung (2017) encourages those working with ESL students to have some type of intercultural communication training, especially with online learning because such learning adds another level of complexity for students. Teaching ESL students can produce difficulties and challenges for both the student and the instructor. Bista and Foster (2011) explains that not only are ESL students having trouble adjusting to the new cultures and languages, they are also facing financial troubles, work and study schedule issues, and other problems that come with being a college student. The purpose of this study will also be to examine the issues that these students face while using study findings to provide recommendations that could help offset communication challenges ESL students face in online learning environments. Previous research conducted by Tan et al. (2010) found, "...that study participants indicated both language and cultural differences presented formidable challenges in online learning situations, and they avoided taking more than one online course at a time (or per semester) because of these challenges" (p. 11).

### **Significance of the Study**

It is the hope of these researchers that this study will provide professors who teach online with resources or recommendations related to communications that could facilitate success in online learning environments for ESL undergraduate students at YSU. The results of the research could also determine some of the obstacles that ESL students face during online learning, and how different communication types might help them to overcome these obstacles. By conducting this research in consideration of the accommodation theory and social learning theory, it is hoped that the accommodation theory will be helpful in assessing whether or not ESL students alter their behavior when interacting with their peers and instructors online. The social learning theory will be used to determine whether or not the adaptation and learning of new cultures and environments impacts the successes of ESL students in their online coursework.

### **Literature Review**

This qualitative study will investigate what forms of communication help ESL students succeed in the online learning environment. In an article by Tan et al. (2010), they explain, “Research in this area could inform the production of cultural awareness and culturally responsive education and thus promote more effective educational practice” (p. 9). The study will focus on ESL students at Youngstown State University engaged in online learning, and its findings may provide more information on how different communication forms can assist ESL students to overcome barriers to their success in online learning environments.

Given the above, this review of the literature focuses on three distinct areas:

- 1. Difficulties ESL students face in online learning environments.**
- 2. Strategies and resources for ESL students in online learning environments.**
- 3. Ties between the social learning theory and online learning.**

### **Difficulties ESL Students Face in Online Learning Environments**

Most students who encounter virtual classrooms face challenges in some form . Although virtual learning can be difficult for English speakers, ESL students are known to face more obstacles within the learning environment due to values and cultural differences. Tan et al. (2010) explain that “international students taking classes in countries different from their home countries often face learning situations compounded by lack of knowledge, understanding of the values and language of the teaching culture, and strong values, attitudes and perceptions of their own” (p. 10). Hughes (2005) explained that international students who participated in their qualitative study knew technology well but did not have much information literacy. The students’ English language limitations greatly affected their usage of online resources and their ability to research information (Hughes, 2005). Lin and Griffith (2014) found that there were cognitive, social, psychological, and technical difficulties that second language writers had with online technology. It was stated that the ability to discuss and ask questions felt inhibited by online communication. Based on previous studies, it was found that many ESL students face difficulty in online learning

### **Strategies and Resources for ESL students in Online Learning Environments**

Throughout the past decade technology has become more advanced than many would’ve imagined. More recently, it has become a way of learning and allows people from around the world to learn from one another. Tan et al. (2010) explain the following: Advancing technology in distance learning has allowed education to transcend the boundaries of brick and mortar schools and classrooms. Virtual learning environments enable students and teachers to share knowledge and information with colleagues around the globe. As distance learning technologies

improve, online learning experiences are becoming ever more popular across the United States .(pg.9)

It's also been found that access to online learning allows for students in different countries to participate and register for classes in locations outside of their home cities and countries. These opportunities allow students to encounter many different environments and experiences. Zhang and Kenny (2010) found that online learning environments allow geographically dispersed students to enroll in courses, thus online learners are more likely to be exposed to a greater variety of learning experiences, including those that reflect cultural conditions and expectations. Kung (2017) analyzed some of the difficulties ESL students and teachers face within the online learning environment and found that the various obstacles students endured helped to provide strategies to improve future courses and present students with the proper learning resources in online learning. Kung (2017) also discussed how important it is for teachers to understand cultural awareness, and how teachers could benefit from a training course on culture. By the end of the training, the instructors would need to demonstrate cultural sensitivity competency, such as by revising one of their current course's curriculums to be more culturally sensitive.

Previous research conducted found that student interactions can be beneficial in a learning environment. Bolliger and Martin (2018) found that inter-student interactions can aid learning of all students in the online learning environment. Specifically, Bolliger and Martin (2018) explain the following: Learner–learner interaction is important in the engagement of students in the online learning environment. This type of interaction provides opportunities for students to learn from one another through the exchange of resources, discussion, sharing of



experiences, and ideas. Through collaboration with peers, students also establish a community of online learners, which can foster deeper learning. (p. 569)

### **Ties between Social Learning Theory and Online Learning**

Social learning theory involves learning and applying a new behavior by adapting it from others. This is done through modeling, which is observing and mimicking practiced behavior (Curnalia, 2016). The adaptations and adjustments made through social learning theory can easily apply to students working in an online environment. Altinay (2017) performed a study within the framework of the social learning theory, explaining that learning itself can be reinforced by technology. In the study, social learning requires modeled learning activities, such as ones that take place during online learning, for it to be meaningful (Altinay 2017). According to Altinay (2017), with social learning being a construct for knowledge, constructing this knowledge often depends on images, symbols and groups. This can be provided by online learning, which makes it beneficial to learners who are attempting to model behavior. Participants in the study believed that a drawback of online learning is that it often lacks real time feedback, which can subsequently harm social learning (Altinay, 2017). The immediate context of the situation can be harmed because of online mediation rather than direct contact from sender to receiver. The absence of face-to-face interaction is already a problem with online learners in their native language, so an area of interest would be how international ESL students would deal with the lack of traditional communication Lin and Griffith (2014) found that “...students felt uncomfortable with communicating online because of the lack of non-verbal cues, facial and body cues, and the difficulty of expressing emotion through text. Also, students were worried that the lack of visual cues can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication.” (p. 310).

### **Research Question**

Multiple studies have stated areas of difficulties where international ESL students have struggled with online learning, particularly with linguistic and cultural barriers. There are also some strategies and resources as to how to break those barriers. The area of social learning theory and its application to online learning can be included in a discussion about online learning with ESL students. Nevertheless, specific methods of communications have not necessarily been discussed throughout this research. As a result, data collected and analyzed for this study will respond to the research question below.

**RQ1:** What types of communications facilitate success in online learning environments for international students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) at Youngstown State University?

### **Method**

This qualitative study will investigate what forms of communication help international English as a Second Language (ESL) undergraduate students succeed in the online learning environment. Lin and Griffith (2014) found that ESL students learning online face social, cognitive, psychological and technical challenges that, while similar to those encountered by other non-ESL students, are elevated for ESL students due to the language barriers. Therefore, this study's findings may provide more information on how different communication forms can assist international ESL undergraduate students to overcome barriers to their success in online learning environments.

The next sections will discuss participants included in the study, how they will be recruited, and how data will be collected and analyzed toward responding to the study's research question:

**RQ1:** What types of communications facilitate success in online learning environments for international students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) at Youngstown State University?

### **Sample**

Participants for this study will be six to 10 international undergraduate ESL students at YSU. To meet the needs of this study, all participants must be international undergraduate students who are classified as “ESL” students or students for whom English is not their primary language. In Tan et al.’s (2010) article, the purpose behind the sample chosen was to assess the learning experiences of ESL students enrolled in online classes while ensuring cultural diversity. Tan et al. (2010) explain that ESL students face learning situations compounded by lack of knowledge, understanding of the values and language of the teaching culture, and strong values, attitudes and perceptions of their own. There are learning situations that range from the transition from Western and Eastern cultures to the difficulties presented by the ideas mentioned previously. Understanding the culture and values of ESL students will be beneficial in understanding their learning difficulties. In Tan et al.’s (2010) article, they discussed the importance of addressing cultural inclusivity in the online learning environment. This will drive educators in the right direction, minimize undesirable outcomes, and make the environment as equitable as possible. These all are important factors to address when finding ways to make ESL students more successful in the online learning environment. What you needed to include in this section was not more literature review, it was support for the sample you chose as I explained multiple times. So, something like “A comparable sample to that proposed in this study was used in the study by Tan et al. (2010).”

**Procedure**

Participants will be recruited by asking the YSU English Language Institute (ELI) for assistance in contacting international ESL undergraduate student participants for the study. Additionally, participants will be asked to recommend other potential participants who meet the parameters of the study's participant needs, which combines convenience and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants for this study. In a study conducted by Tan et al. (2010), students who originally volunteered to participate in the study then recommended other student participants, increasing overall participant numbers for the study, which supports the participant recruitment methods used in this study.

**Instrumentation**

Data for this study will be collected via two methods: First, a qualitative survey administered through Google Forms, and second, follow-up virtual interviews with those who indicate in the survey that they would be willing to participate in such an interview.

In the survey, participants will answer multiple choice demographic questions and will then move onto the extended response questions, which focus on their experiences with online learning as an international ESL undergraduate student. At the end of the survey, participants will be asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up virtual interview. Those participants who indicate they are willing to be interviewed will be scheduled for a virtual interview conducted through the Zoom platform. Zoom is a very easy and accessible platform for the participants and the conductors of the study. Not only does it provide a contactless approach (and important consideration during the COVID-19 pandemic), it also gives the researchers the option to record and store the interview sessions. Before beginning the interviews, participants

will again be asked for their agreement to consent to participating in the study, as well as asked for their consent to have their participation recorded for accuracy in research purposes. In addition to recording interviews, notes will be taken throughout the interview by the researchers to add to the trustworthiness of this study's data collection methods.

The rationale for the two different methods of data collection is as follows. For the survey - researchers believed that a qualitative survey would not only be safer due to the current pandemic, but would also give participants an opportunity to express their opinions and feelings without any direct one-on-one interaction with researchers, encouraging them to answer the questions honestly, based on their experiences. The follow-up interviews are being offered to gather richer, more in-depth information about international ESL undergraduate students' experiences in online learning environments. This is comparable to data collection methods used by Zhang and Kenny (2010) who explained that "... semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives of online learning and their experiences in an online learning environment" (p. 22).

### **Analysis**

The researchers will be using thematic analysis to interpret the information collected throughout the interview process, as described in Curnalia et al. (2017). Zhang and Kenny (2010) used thematic analysis to evaluate participants' interview responses and found this method of qualitative analysis to be effective in determining the study's primary themes. The researchers in this study will first gather all survey data, identify units of analysis to code, and then engage in coding of these units from collected survey data. Then, they will transcribe each interview when

it concludes, re-read the transcriptions, and identify units of analysis to code from the transcripts, code each unit of analysis within each transcript.

### **Introduction**

Throughout the data collection process, the researchers were faced with difficulties when finding ESL students who wanted to take part in the qualitative survey. Although the researchers reached out to various sources, only two participants took part in the survey. One of the participants took the time to answer all of the multiple-choice questions but did not answer any of the extended response questions. The second participant answered all of the survey questions, including the multiple choice and the extended response questions. Both participants also indicated their willingness to participate in the post-survey interview however, when the researchers followed up with the participants to schedule a date and time for the interview, neither responded.

There are various things that could have impacted the lack of participation in this study. Because survey participation was voluntary and incurred no penalty for not taking the survey, many potential participants within the research study's targeted population pool chose not to take it. Some students may have felt uncomfortable taking the survey or felt that it was an invasion of privacy. Another potential reason for the low participation rate may be that those targeted may not have any feelings about the impact of online learning on their overall retention. It's also possible that the reason for the research study itself or study finding's potential benefits to future ESL students were not made clear to them. Seeing as it is almost the end of the semester, some students could have forgotten about the request for research participants altogether or overlooked the call for participants' email sent to them by the English Language Institute or the International Programs Office on these researchers' behalf. The lack of participants may also be the result of

bad timing, especially if those within the study's population pool are already overwhelmed with work and classes. Lastly, some students may have liked some form of incentive such as, extra credit, gift cards, etc. for participating in the study, which was not offered for this study.

There are a few things that could have been done differently in order to attract more participants. For example, it is likely that the researchers could have found more participants if time wasn't a factor. This would provide the opportunity for those students who are currently overwhelmed with school and/or things going on in their lives the option to participate in the study at a later date and time. If it were up to the researchers,[SB1] it would have been helpful if incentives like extra credit were offered to students who participated in the survey. Another option would have been for the researchers to go to various classes throughout the campus to discuss with current ESL students how study findings could positively affect online learning for future ESL students but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, such interactions were not feasible. The final adjustment that could be made in the future is for the researchers to provide more reminder emails encouraging the potential participants to take a moment and fill the survey out.

The remainder of the paper will describe the pros and cons that researchers faced throughout the data collection process. It will also explain the data that was collected and the methods used to collect them, as well as what the data analysis process would have been and how it would have been conducted had sufficient participants been recruited for the study. The paper will also discuss limitations of the research and the recommendations for future research.

## **Results**

The initial qualitative study was designed to investigate what forms of communication help international English as a Second Language (ESL) undergraduate students succeed in the online learning environment. After initial efforts to recruit international ESL student participants

failed, the study's research participant population from which to recruit was extended to include all ESL students at YSU. For this study, the researchers intended to use a qualitative survey administered through Google Forms as their primary means of data collection, and prepared for follow-up virtual interviews with participants who completed the survey and indicated a willingness to participate in the follow-up interview to address any unanswered questions or to expand upon answers received in the initial survey.

The qualitative survey asked participants a series of multiple-choice questions related to the study's research focus, followed by a series of extended response questions that would allow for the collection of more detailed data related to the study's research question. Questions included specifics related to participant's demographic information, questions about their time at Youngstown State University and some of the challenges they had experienced at YSU, as well as questions asking participants to weigh in on some of the areas in which they believed YSU communications and online learning environments could use some improvement. Of the two participants, one answered the multiple-choice questions but skipped questions that needed an extended response, while the other participant answered all questions. Both participants indicated that they would participate in the virtual interview, but did not respond to an email from researchers to proceed with setting up the interview process. The initial study was conducted to collect and analyze data that would allow researchers to respond to the following research question:

**RQ1:** What types of communications facilitate success in online learning environments for international students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) at Youngstown State University?



The researchers reached out to the English Language Institute (ELI) to find participants. The ELI gave the researchers five names out of the six to 10 required participants. The researchers reached out to those students with a request for participation but did not receive any responses back. The researchers had also planned to ask the original participants for ‘snowball sample’ participants in order to find more students to participate in the study but because they did not hear back from any of them, were unable to do this. After failing to hear back from the originally targeted students, the researchers then reached out to the International Programs office, but did not hear anything back from the administrators in this after. After consulting with the study’s principal investigator, it was recommended to send out the information out to as many students and faculty as possible in order to create a larger audience. In the end, the qualitative survey was completed by only two participants in the time period needed for data collection.

The researchers had planned to use thematic analysis to analyze collected data. In research conducted by Zhang and Kenny (2010), they reviewed and studied their collected data using the thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a very popular approach usually applied to texts. This approach would have been very helpful in transcribing and reviewing the data collected from the interviews. Due to the fact that there were no interviews collected, the thematic analysis approach would not be very successful.

### **Discussion**

As stated previously, the low rate of participation in this study may have been influenced by many different factors. Some students may not check their emails as often as others, and the fact that an unfamiliar name was contacting them may have made them less inclined to respond to the researchers’ email calls for participants. Distraction is another factor that has to be considered as students may have wanted to complete the survey but may have forgotten about it,

or the timing was not right for them to participate. It is also a very hectic season - students are getting ready for finals and other serious school projects as the semester comes to an end. There may also be other personal factors that came into play that hindered participation in the survey.

### **Limitations**

It was very difficult to get into contact with participants through email. The English Learning Institute responded to email, but it took two days. During this period of time, the researchers reached out to classmates to ask for their participation and to be pointed in the direction of more participants. This was also an unsuccessful attempt. Because participation in the survey was strictly voluntary, students may have felt less inclined to participate. An incentive such as extra credit or gift cards may have driven students to participate in the survey. All in all, lack of communication, time and interest were major challenges the researchers faced when trying to recruit participants.

### **Direction for Future Research**

In future studies, a few adjustments that should be made to facilitate the success of the data collection process. One of the adjustments would include extending the time frame that the participants have to fill out the survey. It will also be beneficial to determine better techniques to attract more participants. The more time allotted to data collection would also help researchers conduct the necessary follow-up interviews. Another recommendation is to follow up with professors to determine how many ESL/international students are in their classes and to discuss ways to target these students for participation directly through these professors. For example, researchers could visit those classes with the professor's permission to explain to the students the qualitative survey process, what it includes, and how it can benefit them based on the data collected. At that time, they can also explain how long the process takes and potentially

collaborate with the professors to offer students who participate extra credit for their participation, increasing the incentive for participation.

### **Conclusion**

The intent of this qualitative study was to investigate what forms of communication help English as a Second Language (ESL) students succeed in the online learning environment. The study wanted to focus on ESL students at Youngstown State University who engage in online learning to learn more about the aforementioned. It was the hope of the researchers that the findings would provide more information on how different communication forms can assist ESL students overcome barriers to their success in online learning environments. The findings of this study were insufficient due to the lack of participation from students. This topic is an important area because of the rising number of international students. These students are just as important as domestic students and there should be more research conducted on this population. This will help ESL students become more successful in the classroom and it will help professors build a more inclusive learning environment. Though the study was not very successful for the initial researchers, it is the hope that their resources, difficulties and knowledge will help those conduct a successful study in the future.

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