

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

Volume 28

July 2017

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ISSN 1475-1585
28 1–56 (2017)



VOLUME 28 JULY 2017 ISSN 1475-1585

JOURNAL OF English for Academic Purposes

Editors
Ken Hyland
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The global forum for
EAP professionals

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

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Journal of English for Academic Purposes

Website: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap>

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Non-native English speakers' experiences with academic course access in a U.S. university setting



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 September 2016

Received in revised form 19 June 2017

Accepted 26 June 2017

Keywords:

Non-native English speakers

Persistence

Pedagogical practices

Higher education

Sheltered instruction

ABSTRACT

This study explores non-native English-speaking (NNES) students' learning experiences in a graduate course. Using qualitative methodology including interviews and focus groups, a total of five graduate student participants (four from China, one from Egypt) provided data about their experiences of learning in a graduate class at a large Southeastern university in the U.S. Data was analyzed by the two researchers from TESOL field using inter-analyst agreement in determining and applying codes to the data. Grounded theory methodology was adopted to interpret the data with no preconceived ideas about NNES students' learning experiences and to develop our own understandings of these experiences. Findings indicate that these NNES students expressed the value of learning in an American classroom with native English speaking students and Americans while also acknowledging the challenges. Internal factors (i.e. motivation) as well as external factors (i.e. encouragement or positive feedback from teachers) contribute to persistence and success of these learners. Results suggest principles of sheltered instruction are effective in a higher education setting for NNES students.

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International students on U.S. college and university campuses now comprise 5.2% of total enrolled populations and recruitment trends show promise of continued increase ([Institute of International Education, 2016](#)). With more than 4000 universities and colleges, the United States has been a popular place for international students to pursue college education ([Chow, 2011](#)). Adopted in 2006, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics) convention is to use the term "international student" when referring to students crossing borders for the specific purpose of studying. Not all international students are non-native English-speaking (NNES) students; this study focused on international NNES students.

When NNES students first arrive in a foreign country, it can be very challenging because they have to learn about basic rules for living and settling down into a new environment, and the adjustment issues of these students have been investigated in many studies ([Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004](#); [Johnson & Sandhu, 2007](#); [Khawaja & Stallman, 2011](#)). In addition to these challenges, NNES students must quickly learn to navigate an English-speaking academic environment as well. In university classrooms, NNES students may find little support among their classmates if they cannot understand each other, and although recent studies ([Campion, 2016](#); [Huang, 2017](#); [Leki, 2006](#)) have shown that teachers are aware of challenges that English learners encounter in academic study, and are making efforts to develop their knowledge and skills to assist these students to overcome the challenges, teachers' qualification and effective development activities and pedagogical practices in

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ESOL have not been identified elaborately to accommodate these students' needs in teaching and to help these students navigate academic challenges.

Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM) (1975) provided foundational research into factors that contributed to student retention in institutions of higher education, and SIM revisions (Tinto, 1975) included persistence as an outcome of students' interactions with their colleges and universities as organizations. Persistence is defined as the "desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning through degree completion" and is considered a significant factor in understanding the success or failure of NNES students (Seidman, 2005, p. 14). Persistence includes both internal and external influences and Bean and Metzner (1985) defined external factors to include the influence of family, friends and employers or professors, and their role in influencing perceptions, commitments, and preferences, and sustaining students' persistence. With these definitions in mind, we were curious about the experiences of graduate level NNES students in academic settings. The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of graduate level NNES students regarding course ease or difficulty, access of course content, supportive pedagogical practices, and internal/external factors that contribute to student success. The research questions were as follows:

- 1) What are non-native English speaking students' expressed experiences of graduate level courses?
- 2) What pedagogical practices support learning for these students?
- 3) What challenges as well as benefits do non-native English speaking students perceive in their graduate level course learning?
- 4) What internal and/or external factors contribute to these students' persistence?

1. Literature review

One assumption about graduate level NNES students is that they are highly motivated and academically accomplished, and Bifue-Ambe (2011) notes that instructors may assume that since students passed the TOEFL they are ready for academic reading and writing. These assumptions can lead to a lack of attention to the experiences of graduate level NNES students in the classroom at the university level. Indeed, Bista (2015) notes that "although international students are an important source of diversity on American college campuses, relatively little is known about their college experiences" (p. 39). Furthermore, Lee and Rice (2007) acknowledge the history of international student university enrollment, but suggest that the reasons for targeting this population for recruitment has changed over time from general "diplomacy and intercultural exchange to globalism, often with underlying economic motivations" (p. 383). Unfortunately, recruitment of international students does not ensure academic course access nor even an awareness or understanding of the academic issues faced by NNES students. The literature suggests some key categories relevant to understanding the academic experiences for NNES students. We will divide this review into the following components: NNES students' academic experiences, instructor actions that support NNES students, and internal and external factors that lead to persistence.

1.1. NNES student academic experiences

Some of the issues that NNES students confront as international students have been reported by researchers, such as marginalization, disempowering discourses, and lack of mentoring (Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein & de Oliveira, 2008; Phillipson, 1992). Many studies further reveal that there are academic challenges for NNES students at the postsecondary level such as understanding rhetorical situations or styles, writing and learning to write in their academic fields, and learning academic and technical vocabulary in their academic disciplines (Casanave, 1990, 1992, 2002; Corson, 1997; Leki, 2003; Zamel & Spack, 2004). Since limited language proficiency could generate academic difficulties and academic stress, the majority of studies stated that language proficiency was a significant predictor of these academic-related problems (e.g., Araujo, 2011; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2007). Compared with native speakers, NNES students are less likely to express themselves appropriately by rhetorical, pragmatic, or sociolinguistic means and it is also more difficult for them to establish positive relationships with peers and professors (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Morita 2004). Mismatched academic and cultural values can lead to dissatisfaction from NNES students with advising practices and NNES students often face difficulties in building a constructive relationship with their professors or academic advisors (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2009). In order to achieve their academic goals, NNES students need to become acculturated into foreign campus life and familiarize themselves with academic cultural norms, practices, and academic discourse embedded within the specific institution and academic discipline (e.g., Lee & Ciftci, 2014; Scandrett, 2011). These studies draw out the key issues of NNES students in academic settings; however, they do not identify or focus on the effective pedagogical practices that support NNES students in their graduate level course learning.

1.2. Instructor actions that support NNES students

Beliefs and values are an integral component of curriculum development and instructional methods (Yero, 2002) and research in this area has been one way to understand instructors' actions and choices. In the K–12 setting, NNES students

(often referred to as English Learners or Emergent Bilinguals) in mainstream classrooms are often “marginalized” and their lived experiences are “ignored” by their teachers (Sharkey & Layzer, 2000, p. 353). Teachers have little knowledge of second language acquisition, and they usually rely on their beliefs about teaching in general (Sharkey & Layzer, 2000). According to Reeves' (2006) survey of secondary teacher attitudes, participants held a positive opinion about the inclusion of English learners in their classrooms. Teachers agreed to provide more time for English learners to complete coursework. But they also stated that they did not have enough training about working with English learners, and some were not interested in receiving related training (Author, in press). conducted a study of secondary teachers' implicit beliefs using an Implicit Association Test instrument designed around English learners. Participants in this study held slightly negative beliefs about English learners.

Many studies (e.g., Bista, 2012; Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Lee, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007) about NNES students in an academic setting come from the student perspective rather than the instructor perspective. There is also a body of work that considers the experiences of NNES students from the instructor perspective (Edwards, An, & Li, 2007; Hennebry, Lo, & Macaro, 2012; Mantzourani, Courtier, Davies, & Bean, 2015). Hennebry et al. (2012) studied both NNES student perceptions of academic courses and their instructors' perceptions. In this study, forty-three NNES students from one department at a Russell Group university were surveyed and some interviewed while six of their instructors were interviewed and some observed. Results of this qualitative study suggested that in spite of the high language level expectations of the university, these students had difficulties in all language domains in an academic setting. Analysis further indicated overlap in perceptions of challenges for NNES students but difference in appropriate response to these challenges. Mantzourani et al. (2015) conducted a study among UK teaching faculty about their perceptions of NNES students in academic settings. Only 30% of respondents accepted any amount of responsibility for improving learning experiences for these students substantiating the dichotomy of perceptions of appropriate response to NNES student academic challenges discussed in Hennebry et al. (2012). Furthermore, 75% of participants in Mantzourani et al. (2015) did not feel they had been provided with training in effective teaching of NNES students.

In terms of supporting NNES students to overcome the challenges presented in an academic setting, researchers reported some effective strategies. For example, Ferris and Tagg (1996) identified new trends in teaching styles in academic settings—more in-class participation and discussions, more group work, more paired or group oral presentations, and effective note-taking were reported as essential. Sawir (2005) noted that NNES students could be at a disadvantage in classrooms where discussions and group work are paramount due to differing educational experiences. Samimy, Kim, Lee, and Kasai (2011) suggested mitigating this disadvantage by highlighting the importance of mentoring in support of NNES students' participation in their academic communities. Other studies stressed the importance of instructors or advisors' guidance in helping NNES students participate properly and effectively in their disciplines (Krase, 2003; Tardy, 2005); these relationships also have been found to influence NNES students' academic success (Belcher, 1994; Kim, 2007; Krase, 2003). Belcher (1994) and Krase (2007) identified that a more collaborative or effective advisor-advisee relationship can help NNES students in graduate studies including support and encouraging students' risk-taking and negotiating of academic demands.

NNES students not only tend to use previous academic experience, feedback and support from instructors and peers, but also reported that the use of overhead and board work, having a sense of humor, and being open to suggestions are also helpful for NNES students to overcome difficulties and integrate academically and successfully (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Chinese students studying abroad have received significant attention. Studies have shown Chinese students to be associated with passive learning, teacher-dependency, rote learning, reluctance to participate, and lack of questioning, initiative and autonomy in study practices (Chan, 2003; Kember, 2000). Further studies seeking to understand successful practices for working with Asian NNES students in higher education identified the importance of addressing the linguistic, cultural and academic needs of NNES Asian international graduate students in higher education, and language skills showed improvement with American student interactions, collaboration, interactive activities, and instructor feedback (Angelova & Zhao, 2016; Cheng, 2013; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Yu et al., 2016). Cheng (2013) also identified the impact of group projects in raising students and instructors' awareness of existence of power relations between NNES and native novice students.

1.3. Internal and external factors that lead to persistence

Tinto's SIM (1975) has been examined, critiqued, and utilized by researchers to understand the factors leading to student retention (Metz, 2002). Tinto's revised SIM suggested the final outcome of both internal and external influences to be persistence, with persistence a key indicator of retention (Metz, 2002). Examinations using the revised SIM have at least partially supported this theory for undergraduate students (Liu & Liu, 2000; Santos-George, 2012); however, questions have persisted as to the application of Tinto's theory for minority students which includes NNES students (Metz, 2002; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000).

One aspect of persistence relates to instructor interaction, in which we include pedagogical choices. Pedagogical practice refers to what teachers do in classrooms, may be based on a learned method, and reflects the teachers' “earlier socialization into the profession of ... teaching either as learners or teachers” (Uzum, 2013, p. 11).

Potter and Ferguson (2003) reported that good pedagogical practices could help to reduce barriers and encourage participation for adult learners in general, but good pedagogical practices for NNES students cannot be assumed to be the same as those for classrooms in which native-English speakers are the norm. Many studies intending to determine best pedagogical practices for working with NNES students have been conducted at the K-12 level, and include sheltered instruction as a pedagogical framework. (Crawford, Schmeister, & Biggs, 2008; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2013; Johnson, 2015;

McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010). Sheltered instruction was a term originally reserved for classrooms that taught a content subject to a classroom of all NNES students, thus ‘sheltering’ them from the academic experiences of their native English speaking peers (Freeman & Freeman, 1988), yet today sheltered instruction principles are applied widely in mainstream classrooms in which NNES students are included. Comprehensible input, cooperative learning, explicit connections to student background and experiences, formative assessment, and use of a variety of supplementary materials are key components of sheltered instruction. Sheltered instruction has rarely been implemented at the tertiary level, and examples come primarily from the undergraduate level and primarily from freshman level composition courses (see review in Knoblock & Youngquist, 2016). Knoblock and Youngquist (2016) compared NNES students enrolled in sheltered reading and composition courses with NNES enrolled in non-sheltered courses and data revealed that NNES were more successful in sheltered courses than in ones where they are enrolled with native English speaking peers.

Teachers' pedagogical practices are often dynamic and subject to change in different contexts. These changes or adaptations are “outcomes of teachers' moment-by-moment judgments of what will work for their teaching objectives” (Uzum, 2013, p. 12). Kumaravadivelu (2006) identified that teachers should have the awareness and ability to design their own methodology to adapt to the specific local context rather than following predesigned “best practice” guidelines that arguably “fit all”. Adapting to the local context includes acknowledging the language capacities of enrolled students and finding ways to ensure access to curriculum. This study examines graduate level students in non-sheltered academic courses. There are no studies of NNES students in higher education settings directly linking effective practices of instructors of NNES students in non-sheltered academic courses to principles of sheltered instruction, and it is in this area that our research contributes to the field.

2. Methodology

In order to investigate the experiences of NNES students in graduate level courses regarding course ease or difficulty, access of course content, pedagogical practices that support NNES students, and internal/external factors that contribute to student success, interviews and a focus group were conducted with NNES graduate students.

Grounded theory informed this study as it sought to explain views and experiences of participants (Creswell, 2007). By using grounded theory methodology, it was possible to (a) explain the data, (b) make generalizations, and (c) discover a new theory that is derived from the data (Charmaz, 2008). Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommend grounded theory when researching a social problem or a situation where those involved had to adapt to changes.

This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of international NNES students regarding course ease or difficulty, access of course content, internal/external factors that contribute to student success and supportive pedagogical practices for NNES students. Grounded theory does not begin with any hypothesis nor preconceived idea about what will be found in the data. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) hypotheses are made only after enough evidence has accrued in order to offer a suggestion, not establish proof. Glaser and Strauss put a premium on emergent theory that comes from the data and is contained in categories that demonstrate, through constant comparison, that they are most relevant and best suited to explain the data. Above all, grounded theory allows for flexibility of methods that permit the theoretical elements within the data to best emerge. Grounded theory is fundamentally emergent (Dick, n.d.), and we considered our data with no set expectations. Our themes emerged from constant comparison and analysis.

2.1. Participants

This qualitative study provides a current perspective of NNES students in a graduate level setting. The study was conducted in the fall semester, 2015. We used convenience sampling for this study, and all NNES students in this study were enrolled in an Applied Linguistics in Second Language Acquisition graduate-level course at a major university in the Southeast of the U.S. There were a total of five participants (four females, one male). They had all passed the TOEFL (Students must score at least 550 on the paper TOEFL, 213 on the computer TOEFL, and 79 on the internet TOEFL or 6.5 Overall Band Score on the IELTS to be considered for admission) and matriculated to university graduate-level courses. Two female students from China were pursuing a master's degree while the other three students were pursuing doctoral degrees. These students did not receive any support services nor were they enrolled in remediation courses or courses designed to improve their English skills. These participants were majoring in fields including adult education, engineering, and English for Speakers of Other Languages. Four of the participants were from China, all spoke Chinese as their first language, and one, who spoke Arabic as a first language, was from Egypt. The length of time they were in the U.S. ranged from 1 to 3 years, and none of them had lived in an English-speaking country besides the U.S.

2.2. Procedures

Interview and focus group data were used to gain a broad picture of the experiences of NNES students in a higher education setting. Participants first were given individual interviews with open-ended questions related to course delivery. Each interview lasted about 20 min. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. After transcribing and coding the data, emerging themes (see Appendix A) were used to develop the final focus group discussion topics. Four of the five participants shared their views in individual interviews then attended one small focus group session. Focus groups created a more

elaborate picture of the perspectives of NNES students by utilizing classroom-based artifacts to generate in-depth discussions among participants. Reliability was established using inter-analyst agreement in determining and applying codes to the data.

2.3. Limitations

This study discusses findings from just five NNES students, and the findings are limited to one university context. The generalizability of this study is limited and it is acknowledged that the individual interviews and focus group discussions elicited the participants' personal perceptions on the issues and cannot completely reflect the situation described. The findings from this study need to be compared or applied to different contexts, such as NNES students from different academic backgrounds, especially from STEM fields. In order to effectively support NNES students these issues need to be understood and addressed within a broader social and intercultural context.

Although these limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting this study's results, it is important to note that we are making recommendations and not causal statements. The codes and themes were reviewed, compared and reworded by two researchers in the field of TESOL to minimize the subjectivity of interpretation. The views expressed by participants, who shared similar experiences, were congruent in many aspects and the recurring nature of the themes emerged from transcription enhanced the credibility of this study. The effective pedagogical practices we offer are still valid and applicable to most pedagogical uses.

3. Results

The participants in this study provided a unique perspective of their experiences in graduate-level coursework. These experiences can be divided into two major categories: benefits and challenges, and both of these categories can contribute to persistence, a primary outcome suggested in Tinto's Student Integration Theory (1975).

3.1. Benefits of American classroom experience for NNES students

'Interactions' or 'communication' is the most often-mentioned word in the individual interviews as well as in the focus group discussion, and in fact, most international students in the United States must shift from lecture method to a freer learning environment (Cheng, 1987). Because of a freer learning environment, students have more opportunity to speak out. Based on the results of individual interviews, it is believed that interaction is vital in learning especially for language learners. From interactions in the classroom, students can gain many opportunities to practice their spoken English and obtain presentation skills. Regarding presentation skills, participants noted:

I learn how to do presentation well, I learn how to do research and my English level has been raised up. The class provided me opportunity to communicate with American students. [Filiz]

After the whole semester I know how to communicate with American students, how to do research and how to understand others paper, and I can understand the contents of the subject and also my writing skills improved a lot ... I understand how to overcome the struggles in the assignment ... and the discussions in class help me improve my speaking and listening skills and have effects on my English language learning and academic courses learning. [Xuan]

Another benefit Xuan mentioned was the professor "really take care of everyone"; Pei agreed with this and further explained that the reason was "the size of classroom in the U.S. was small which was important for language learning" since in small classrooms students can "learn more effectively and had more interactions."

NNES students in a totally different setting from their home countries can learn different local cultures, educational systems, learning styles, learning strategies and teaching techniques. Participants (Pei and Xuan) expressed the value of learning in an American classroom with native English-speaking students and Americans.

I learned how to get along with American professors, American friends, also the way of teaching and the way of studying in an American campus. As a result of studying in the United States, I know more about American classrooms. [Pei]

I know how to get along with American friends and professors and I have much contact with them, and I know more through daily conversation, how they say things and how they express a real intent. [Xuan]

3.2. Challenges of American classroom experience for NNES students

English language ability and its impact on the educational adjustment process is an important concern for NNES students (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). Newman and Hartman (2012) insisted that language barriers are the main obstacle for newcomers to the U.S. and almost all of the participants in their study reported language challenges that directly impacted their performance or satisfaction with their skills. They noted that without conscious attention by the instructor to ways that language is used and received, many NNES students struggle to attain academic standing to the level of their native English-

speaking peers. One participant comment suggested this connection between language challenges and effort to maintain levels with native English-speaking peers:

When I first came here I felt the school work was really stressful and I have to take extra time to revise my writing and correct grammar problems. [Xuan]

In terms of language skills, participants agreed that listening and speaking are two difficult tasks/skills for them to master. Native speakers speak so fast and use phrases we don't use in daily life. When I meet in the normal communication with other people, I may take a longer time to transfer my thinking; however, native speakers just use one or two sentences to transfer their meaning, and it increase my workload in the study or daily life. [Rui]

Maybe I need to improve pronunciation. At the beginning, I can't understand professor well. Maybe she give instruction, and my understanding is another way. I made some mistakes. [Filiz]

My class is based on discussion and I have to listen very well and answer questions from teachers and classmates. I have to make sure what I perceived is what the people say exactly. It took some time to get used to them. [Xuan]

Participants also reported some cultural challenges. Because of limited language proficiency and different cultures, NNEs students have difficulties in communication with native speakers. [Li, Baker, and Marshall \(2002\)](#) found that many students are not mentally and culturally well-prepared for the new environment and they are unaware of how many adjustment problems they must overcome in the totally different learning settings. In the words of one participant:

The most challenging thing for me is the [American] culture. At very beginning, I don't know much about American ways and how people get along, and the Americans point out error directly and maybe Chinese will express their thought indirectly. [Pei]

3.3. Factors contributing to persistence

The participants in this study had high motivation, which is an important internal factor for them to persist in their graduate level study. Mastering a foreign language requires learners to overcome several major difficulties such as a skillful use of phonological, syntactic, and semantic codes ([Sparks & Ganschow, 1993](#)). This process usually takes great effort and a long period. Participants showed motivation to continue learning English. They were motivated to seek opportunities and resources to improve their learning.

I always go to ask some native speakers help my writing. I often attend social activity and it helped me improve my speaking skill. [Xuan]

I spend couple of hours for assignment ... I seek more sources to help me. [Filiz]

When I have a project to do I will search the internet for help and may search for some paper and some related materials, then I will read, and judge if they are valuable or not and then I will digest the whole paper, and if it is useful I will come up with ideas to solve problems, and if not, I will continue to search. [Rui]

External factors that could be considered as contributing to persistence came from assistance of professors, native-speaking peers as well as other friends and parents. Encouragement from peers and instructors appears to be an effective factor for NNEs students in this study to persist with their learning.

I found my professors are very happy to help me and I feel encouragement from professors. [Rui]

The classmates are nice and I have much contact with my colleagues in the same office. They helped me a lot. When I met some cultural differences that I don't know and I came back and ask them and they will tell me. [Pei]

Some friend told me "you have to try [to speak out in English language], don't be shy, if you continue like that, you won't learn anything." [Filiz]

Cooperation is important. Classmates support me and I learn how to cooperate with them, I also have support from parents. I feel lonely and have some struggles and parents provide emotional support, and also financial and psychological support to me. They support me by saying "never give up". It is an encouragement. [Xuan]

3.4. Pedagogical practices that support NNEs students

Sheltered Instruction, a pedagogical framework, informs the analysis of participant feedback in this discussion. Sheltered Instruction typically refers to modified content area instruction of grade-level standards that promotes academic English development ([Echevarria et al., 2013](#)). Pedagogical practices of Sheltered Instruction include comprehensible input, cooperative learning, explicit connections to student background and experiences, formative assessment, and use of a variety of supplementary materials.

Participant responses regarding supportive pedagogical practices supported two aspects of Sheltered Instruction: cooperative learning and use of supplementary materials.

Cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is a pedagogical strategy used in classrooms that fosters group work with the goal of shared responsibilities, co-construction of knowledge, and practice in the skill of cooperation. Participants in this study indicated a positive attitude toward this type of learning.

Through group project, I know how to cooperate with students. I like group discussions in class. [Xuan]

Interactions between teacher and students are very important for students to improve speaking skills. [Pei]

In class the group project is good. We will have much more opportunities to communicate and do some projects in the class not outside the class. [Rui]

Group members provide me lots of help, and, there are a lot of opportunities to discuss with other students or teachers and we can do some project together in class. [Filiz]

Supplementary materials. In addition to cooperative learning, participants noted that the use of supplementary materials by instructors aided them in accessing the content of the course. Some of the materials mentioned were graphic organizers, explicit steps in processes of using new technology, examples of exemplary work, and simulations of tests and experiments.

I benefited from early access to project criteria. He [the teacher] would like to post the project before what we were learning, and it is a little bit advanced to what we have studied. He also provided simple examples that are similar to our project and I can use the same method to solve my problem. The procedure may not be the same but it is helpful for me to be familiar with the material I should learn. [Rui]

The most beneficial thing is the professor asked us to take the simulate test. One of the assignments we asked to do is to do reflection of language assessment test. What the professor did is at the very beginning of the class she asked us to take the test for ourselves and then give us our score and so that we have understanding about what the test looks like and how many parts it has and we have personal experience to take the test, so when the time for writing the paper comments I feel I have a lot to say about it, it helped a lot and I am very satisfied with my assignment at that time. [Pei]

I used to take a language learning class, and the professor provide graphic organizers to help us understand, and when I wrote paper, the professor will provide some examples or peer's project to let us understand how everything is going or how can we write every section. [Xuan]

4. Discussion

The ultimate goal of this research was to learn more about NNES students' graduate level academic learning experiences in a university setting from the perspective of students. Participants reported some particular challenges from language as well as culture in a university setting. At the same time, they expressed the value of learning in an American classroom with native English-speaking students and Americans. NNES students noted the benefit from a freer learning environment where students have more opportunity to speak out and interact with native speakers and instructors.

Tinto's SIM suggests that students persevere in challenging academic settings based on interactions within colleges and universities (Tinto, 1975). While Tinto's revised theory primarily discusses internal and external factors that contribute to student integration and persistence, we suggest that instructor pedagogical actions and classroom interactions contribute as well. The data analysis in this study supports the idea that such external factors could contribute to persistence. Keeping in mind the reciprocity of a learning environment allows us to see the influence of instructor actions on a daily basis. Verbal, face to face communication, email, linguistically supported lectures and classroom discussions, assignment descriptions, models, and feedback all contribute to a students' sense of efficacy which can lead to persistence.

Key components of sheltered instruction were identified in participant comments and illuminated the fact that NNES students benefit from instructors' conscious attention to student access of curriculum and environment. For example, cooperative learning was reported by participants as a valuable aspect of their experience in American classrooms. It fostered group work from which students could negotiate meaning, clarify academic language as well as learn to socialize with their American counterparts, improve their spoken English and strengthen mutual understanding with native speakers. According to Daoud (2003), group work can have a positive effect on NNES students as it increases students' interaction thereby providing opportunities to refine spoken English. However, teachers should pay attention to students' feelings and reactions about the group activities. Additionally, the use of supplementary materials is a necessary strategy reportedly used by instructors to help learners access the content of the course. Visual aids, technology, graphic organizers, examples of exemplary work, and simulations of tests and experiments are all effective methods for instructors to adopt to enhance the comprehension of their courses for NNES students.

4.1. Implications

This study identified challenges as well as benefits NNES students perceived along with factors contributing to their persistence in academic learning. It adds to the existing literature on effective pedagogical practices for NNES students as well

as offers new insights that stimulate debate and discussion around the issues. The results of the present study suggest that NNES students experience the benefits of interaction and communication in their English-medium graduate coursework, yet also face challenges from both language and culture. Knowing the value of oral communication for NNES students can enhance an instructor's overall toolkit for classroom instruction. Therefore, it is important for instructors to increase their awareness that NNES students may have special needs that can be targeted and supported. It is helpful if instructors are mindful of the language they use in the classroom, connect students' prior knowledge to new knowledge and put value and emphasis on students' culture and academic background. It is suggested that instructors increase the comprehensibility of the text, their speech and other instructional materials. For example, written forms of English may be easier to understand for students than oral forms, thus it is helpful for instructors to write the instructions on a handout or PowerPoint. Instructors who pay attention to the language they use can mitigate some of the challenges experienced by NNES students. For example, some culture-embedded language (i.e. idioms or slang) is difficult to understand for learners if they don't share the same cultural background with native speakers. Additionally, interactions or communication are reported as important factors for NNES students to make progress and achieve academic success. Various classroom activities can be used in the classroom to provide more opportunities for students to speak out and learn from each other. Group work could be helpful to increase students' interaction and refine spoken English. However, Daoud (2003) suggests that care must be taken in partnering NNES students with native English language speakers. The most effective pairing is that of a mid-to high-level NNES student with a native speaker interested in working with NNES students (p. 313). As the population of NNES students on U.S. university campuses continues to grow, instructors of non-sheltered courses should be trained to have some knowledge of sheltered instruction principles thus furthering course access for NNES students enrolled in English-medium courses.

4.2. Directions for future research

This study used qualitative research methods. Both qualitative and quantitative studies can be used to explore NNES students' learning experiences in university settings. More participants from different majors and cultural backgrounds can be investigated to examine the further differences and similarities among them. Further exploration of external factors related to persistence would continue to add to the body of research related to Tinto's theories of student integration. Instructors' perspectives about best pedagogical practices to meet the needs of NNES students can be explored together with students' perspectives. Additionally, considering the focus of responses related to interaction and communication that are easily afforded in a classroom where group work and active learning preside, research about the experiences of NNES students in active learning classrooms is warranted.

Appendix A. Code Book with Examples

NNES Experiences with Course Access in Higher Education

1. Benefits: this code is used whenever a participant mentions a benefit they feel they have had by participating in an American academic classroom.
 - a. *Most meaningful thing for me is through communicating with other American students my listening skill improved a lot*
 - b. *The environment here is good to improve my listening and speaking.*
2. Challenges: this code is used whenever a participant mentions a challenge they have experienced in an American academic classroom
 - a. *At the beginning, I can't understand professor well. She give instruction, and my understanding is another way. I made some mistakes.*
3. Classroom comparisons: this code is used whenever a participant makes a comparison between his or her home country classroom and an American classroom
 - a. *I attended language training school. They don't have much group discussion. Most time teacher teach and they don't have any interaction with students. The teacher just give lecture and he just read a word and I just follow his pronunciation. Most time we don't have discussion.*
4. Persistence - External Factor: This code is used whenever a participant mentions something outside of themselves that contributed to his/her persistence
 - a. *Some friend told me you have to try, don't be shy, if you continue like that, you won't learn anything.*
5. Persistence – Internal Factor: This code is used whenever a participant mentions something that THEY did to help them persist academically
 - a. *then sometimes I will come up with ideas that could solve problem, and if not, I will continue to search*
 - b. *as for assignment, if the material is hard I have to seek more sources to help me.*
6. Instructor actions that support students (non academic): this code is used whenever a participant mentions a non-academic instructor action of support
 - a. *I was worrying about my language level, my grammar, my writing. I talked to her and she said don't worry, you are fine, I just want you learn. She helped me a lot.*

7. Pedagogical Practices that support NNES students: This code is used whenever a participant mentions something an instructor did that supported them academically
- a. *I used to take a language learning class, and the professor provide graphic organizers to help us understand*

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