Promoting Success for International Doctoral Students

Lisa Russell-Pinson, PhD
Faculty Associate for Academic Writing
The Graduate School
Agenda

- Introduction
- Understanding international doctoral students
  - General information
  - Writing-related challenges
- Discussion
Introduction

Lisa Russell-Pinson, Ph.D.

- Faculty Associate for Academic Writing (2013- )
- Responsibilities include:
  - Teaching a credit-bearing, graduate-level course on academic writing for multilingual writers (GRAD 6010/8010):
    - Common genres and part-genres in academic writing
    - Writing process
    - Writing fluency
Introduction

- Implementing dissertation-related programming for all doctoral students:
  - Dissertation boot camps
  - Dissertation writing retreats
  - One-on-one writing support
- Developing and delivering writing-based workshops and presentations for all graduate students.
- Providing departmental support on writing-based initiatives.
Doctoral Students at UNC Charlotte

- Total number of doctoral students = 808\textsuperscript{1}
  - International doctoral students = 282\textsuperscript{2}
    - Main disciplines:
      - Computing and Informatics
      - Engineering
    - Main countries of origin:
      - China
      - Iran
      - India

Sources: Office of Institutional Research, University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2015)\textsuperscript{1}; International Student and Scholars Office, University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2015)\textsuperscript{2}. 
Common problems faced by international students include:

- Lack of community and a sense of isolation
- Homesickness
- Worry about social and political events in home country
- Unfamiliarity with the target culture:
  - In the U.S.
  - U.S. academic culture
  - Disciplinary culture
- Financial issues
- Lack of appropriate language proficiency
- Insecurity about language proficiency
Prior educational experiences:

I’d like to get more information on critical thinking...I don’t mind being trained like a 5 grade primary student because that’s the part of education I didn’t get.

We started learning English very early. All the four parts of “reading”, “writing”, “speaking” and “listening” were considered in our education. But there is still a huge problem among them. The problem is almost all the English teachers [in my country] have not been abroad or not been in an English speaking country. The English they taught was not “real English”.
International Doctoral Students Say…

Cultural issues:

As graduate student, although not a social [science?] major, I think we’d like to understand the social structure better, for example, how the tax work, how the medical care work. Honestly, I never really understand them.

One of the hardest experiences I had during my study in the US is the teacher/student relationship. What to expect from your teachers is very different in the US than in [my country]. [In my country], the teachers, especially advisor, take more responsibilities for the students. For instance, my undergraduate advisor came to me regularly to ask my study life and gave specific goals for me to achieve. That doesn’t happen here. I have to be very independent.
International Doctoral Students Say…

Cultural issues:

One issue I had and still am not natural with is **greetings** in the U.S. It is probably related both with language and culture. When people say, “What’s going on?”, “What’s up?”...I am not sure what should I respond. Should I just say ‘good’, should I talk about what I did a few hours ago?...Another issue is **culture in the classroom**. Some small things like what I should do if I want to go to the restroom. How often should I ask question? I have many questions due to language and culture.
International Doctoral Students Say…

Finances and work:

…the problem is a person here in USA would say like, “Hey, it’s a cheap thing, why don’t you buy it it’s only $10.” But for an international person I have the mentality of [converting it to my currency]. So to me it’s very expensive and they just don’t get it.

Working while studying is another challenge. Thanks to the teaching assistantship, we can guarantee our basic life, however, working 20 hours per week for the first two year doctoral students is really a challenge experience.
International Doctoral Students Say…

Working:

Especially for the student just come to USA, it is necessary for faculty to assign TA [teaching assistant] position than RA [research assistant] position due to the learning phase of a student. As my experience goes, I spent quite a long time, nearly a year, working as a TA and taking credits at the same time. This gave me direct contact of American students and professors in a relatively less stressful way compared to my later years working as an RA.
International Doctoral Students Say…

English proficiency:

Some Asian languages are quite different than others, because they are not alphabet based language. For example, [my language] is based on the “meaning”…In this case, it somewhat more difficult for a student [from my country] to think and write in English than students in the countries like France.

I think I really need help with public speaking. For the first two years here, I even tried to avoid presentations. However, presentation is such a good way to help me to not only understand, but also to organize and convey information. I’d really appreciate if there could be any form of training about this [in my department].
International Doctoral Students Say…

English proficiency:

There is no doubt about the language as the biggest challenge. Although we have learnt English for ten years since elementary school, there are still thousands of spoken English [words] are used in daily life, especially when spoken in class. Also, given the difference of education system, we need to spend some time in the skills of communication and presentation of our own ideas.

I do not face that much of an issue in understanding English, but one must understand the accent that I speak of English and the accent people speak here are not the same. So sometimes it makes me a bit difficult to understand.
Other:

*It is hard to adjust to weather* here. *It is cold sometimes and unpredictable.*

*I try to make friends with Americans. They are nice, but we do not have friendships like my country.* I want this, but don’t know how to do.
Supporting International Doctoral Students

- Get to know your international students:
  - Their interests, backgrounds and cultures
  - Their difficulties and successes
  - Their personalities

- Share your experiences:
  - As a student in your own doctoral program
  - As a visitor to their countries
  - As a learner of a second/foreign language
Supporting International Doctoral Students

- Provide opportunities for and encourage international students to participate and get involved in organizations and events:
  - In your department
  - On campus
  - In your discipline
  - With other students
Supporting International Doctoral Students

- Attend events to learn about and from international students:
  - International Coffee Hour
  - International Festival
  - Community-based international organizations and events
  - Workshops, brown bags and presentations
    - Center for Graduate Life
    - International Programs
    - Center for Teaching and Learning
Supporting International Doctoral Students

- Make students aware of funding opportunities and grants available to non-citizens.
- Encourage students to form:
  - Study groups
  - Writing groups
- Urge students to seek support:
  - Center for Graduate Life
  - Counseling Center
  - International Programs
“Academic writing is a social practice concerning the

• Display
• Evaluation
• Construction
• Negotiation

of knowledge within academic disciplines” (condensed from Hyland, 2004).
“The persuasiveness of academic discourse...does not depend on the demonstration of absolute fact, empirical evidence or impeccable logic...[rather] it is the result of effective rhetorical practices, accepted by community members. Texts are the actions of socially situated writers and are persuasive only when they employ social and linguistic conventions that colleagues find convincing” (Hyland, 2000: 8).
Multilingual Students as Academic Writers

- Many multilingual doctoral students face challenges, including understanding:
  - How native language and culture influence writing in a second language, such as:
    - Expectations for organizing texts, criticizing the literature, making and supporting claims, sustaining an argument, etc.
    - The need to express ideas clearly and succinctly in academic English (reader-oriented culture)
    - Academic integrity
  - Discipline-specific norms for writing
  - The writing process
  - How to produce long stretches of texts
  - How to accurately assess their strengths and weaknesses in academic writing
Some multilingual doctoral students have other difficulties, including understanding:

- The importance of writing in U.S. doctoral programs
- How to deal with psychological issues related to writing:
  - Procrastination
  - Perfectionism
  - Anxiety and stress
  - Imposter syndrome
- How to manage time
- The importance of strong reading skills
- How to take effective notes while reading
- How to communicate appropriately with faculty
- When, where and how to seek help
International Doctoral Students Say…

Academic writing:

Advisors need to understand that academic writing in foreign language is not a trivial task. Thus, they need to urge their students to practice writing as early as possible and give them thoughtful feedback on their writing consistently. Otherwise, students will need more time to produce papers later in their senior graduate years.
International Doctoral Students Say…

Academic writing:

One of the most important thing is that the advisor has to consider that the student’s first language is not English, so he/she has to be patient, and he/she also can help student by hold the regular meeting to talk about writing and technical things. This will help the student to improve his language abilities.
“In a very real sense, doctoral supervisors are writing teachers. As they guide students through the dissertation process, they are introducing them to discipline-specific discourse practices. **They advise on how and where certain things should be said, on what must and must not be mentioned, and on who should or should not be cited or criticized.** Through feedback, questions, suggestions, and instruction, they help students locate their written contribution within the historical, intellectual, and rhetorical trends and traditions of their field. In addition, they are the arbiters of **quality**, and must determine if and when the student has achieved an acceptable level of specialized thought and expression” (Paré 2011: 59).
Supporting the Writing of International Doctoral Students

- Begin preparing students for the dissertation stage before they are ABD.
- Provide models of good academic writing in your field for students to read.
- Have explicit discussions about what constitutes “good writing” in your discipline.
- Provide opportunities for continuous writing.
- Recognize common writing problems of novice academic writers.
- Provide relevant and substantive feedback.
- Do not expect perfection in English.
- Suggest extra help when needed
  - Center for Graduate Life
  - Counseling Center
  - International Programs

Source: List drawn primarily from Russell-Pinson and Casanave (in preparation).
Your Experiences

- What challenges have you faced in working with international doctoral students?

- What strategies have you used to help these students succeed?
Contact Us

Lisa Russell-Pinson:  lpinson@uncc.edu

Center for Graduate Life:  http://gradlife.uncc.edu

Thank you for your attendance & participation!