

Language as an Instructional Barrier:

Towards Support for International Faculty

Joshua C. Nwokeji, Tinukwa Boulder,
and Ikechukwu Ohu,
Interdisciplinary Research Group (IRG)
Gannon University, Erie, Pennsylvania 16541
Email: Nwokeji001@gannon.edu

Nkeiruka Chigozirim Okolie
Education Technology Consultant,
Lagos State, Nigeria
Email: Chigozirimokolie@yahoo.com

Abstract—Unfamiliar accent and lack of fluency in English language have been identified as key challenges for international faculty in USA universities and colleges, particularly non-native English speakers and writers. These can have negative effects such as loss of interest in a given course, and possibly lead to poor performance. Currently, there are little or no evidence that most USA universities have effective strategies to support international faculty who write and speak English as a second language. Even learning management systems (LMS) provide little or no functionality to support non-native English speakers. This paper presents a summary of scholarly discussion on how language issues such as lack of fluency and unfamiliar accent can affect teaching and learning, and various strategies that universities can adopt to support international faculty working in the USA. This discussion took place in one of the catalyzing collaborative conversations (C3) sessions at Frontiers in Education Conference 2016.

I. PROBLEM AND MOTIVATION

Universities and colleges in the United States of America (USA) are increasingly recruiting international faculty to contribute to teaching, learning, and scholarship. According to *Higeredujobs.com*¹, there are over one hundred and twenty thousand (120,000) foreign-born or international faculty in USA universities in the 2014-2015 academic year. Most of these scholars are recruited from countries that primarily communicate in languages other than English. Although it can be argued that appreciable knowledge of English language is a prerequisite for employing international faculty, the vast majority of them still have challenges with pronunciation, fluency, and accent. Clearly, these would have some negative impact on teaching, learning, scholarship, and students' engagement. For instance, unfamiliar accent can impede students' comprehension of instructional materials and also make them to lose interests in a course and its instructor. More so, since effective communication and clarity of instructors are well known to facilitate teaching and learning, it also follows that ineffective communication and lack of clarity would pose barriers to teaching, learning, and scholarship.

Apart from international faculty, foreign students in the USA may also face similar challenges. However, there appears to be a significant effort from universities to support foreign students through various avenues such as providing writing

skills, learning centers, free tuition on English as a second language (ESL), among many others. These types of support are not usually provided for international or foreign-born faculty in most USA universities, if available at all, work load and higher expectations of faculty do not avail them the time and opportunity to benefit from such supports. Perhaps part of the problem might be that most faculty members may be uncomfortable to attend English language classes with their students. Therefore there is a need to devise new approaches, systems, and methods to support international faculty to improve their communication skills.

Apart from the research carried out by scholars such as [1] and [2], there seems to be a general lethargy, among scholars, on exploring the challenges faced by international faculty as well as finding effective solutions. The aim of this paper and preceding C3 (catalyzing collaborative conversation) session is to initiate or revive the discussion and analysis of the problem of at hand, namely, language as an instructional barrier to foreign born faculty and students. The session also aims to encourage scholarly ideas and contributions towards finding solutions to the stated problem or challenge. The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Details of the C3 session is provided in Section II, while the recommendations made by scholars are presented in Section III. The last section of this paper acknowledges those that participated and other contributed in this C3 session.

II. THE C3 SESSION

The discussion reported in this paper took place, in a one-hour slot, as one of the C3 sessions at the 2016 Frontiers in Education (FIE 2016) conference. The session has three (3) participants from three (3) universities in the USA, including Gannon University, Purdue University, and North Carolina State University. This C3 session was divided into three main phases, which include *introduction*, *problem and motivation*, and *recommendations*. In the introduction phase, the aim of the session was stated, so as to ensure that participants understand and share a common goal. This aim is mentioned in the abstract of this paper and further described in Section I, hence it will not be repeated here.

In the second phase, participants were given the opportunity to present their views and discuss how unfamiliar accent,

¹<http://tinyurl.com/z7g7ra6>

lack of fluency, and mispronunciation of English words can constitute a barrier to teaching and learning activities as well as scholarship. The problems identified by participants in this phase have been described in Section I of this paper. In addition, they pointed out a possibility that students can blame low performance in a given course on unfamiliar accent or lack of fluency of the instructor, even when either of these are not the cause for low performance.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

After the problem and motivation, participants were asked to make recommendations on possible ways of solving or reducing the effects of the stated problems. Further description of these recommendations is given in the sections below.

A. Need to Create Awareness

There is a need to clearly articulate, document, and create more awareness of the issues of unfamiliar accent, lack of fluency, mispronunciation, as well as other challenges faced by international faculty working in USA Universities. It appears that most USA universities and colleges have not realized that these have potentials to adversely affect learning outcomes, students' engagement, performance, etc. It is possible that the aforementioned issues will continue to hurt higher educational institutions, unless an appreciable level of awareness is created among universities and faculty. One way to create this awareness is through publications, orientations, and other avenues such as the media.

B. Information Systems and Technology Support

Undoubtedly, information technology and systems (IT/S) can provide some capabilities to solve a broad variety of problems, including problems relating to teaching and learning. These capabilities can also be extended to provide effective solutions to instructional barriers such as unfamiliar accent and lack of fluency. IT/S companies and open source learning technology developers should initiate a process to develop information systems and technologies that could help foreign born faculty improve their accent and achieve a level fluency that can ensure effective communication and clarity of instructional materials.

For instance, it can be possible to develop a glossary of words used in a given discipline. Each word in the glossary can then be accompanied with its correct pronunciation in an audio format such as MP3. This can be integrated into existing LMS such as Blackboard and Moodle. This can provide an avenue for foreign born faculty to practice American English accent, and learn the correct pronunciation of words they use in class room during instruction. Another possibility is to develop virtual pronunciation assistants (VPAs) and attach them to online course resources.

C. Funding Support

Funding organizations, such as the National Science Foundation (NSF), should consider making funds readily available for researchers who may be interested in research project relating to the subject of discourse. This can encourage researchers

to analyze the problems and develop more innovative ideas towards possibly solutions. More so, this can be another way to create awareness. In addition to external funding bodies, universities and colleges, particularly those who recruit foreign born professors, can provide internal funding to encourage their faculty to develop and carry out research project this area.

D. Internal Support Strategies

Universities should start designing and implementing strategies to support foreign born faculty. For instance, English learning centers and pronunciation tutorials, similar to the ones foreign students attend, can be organized for specifically foreign born faculty. Most universities in the USA have center for excellence in teaching and learning (CETL), which, among many other functions, support professional development of faculty. Universities and colleges can extend their respective CETL, and also equipped them with special resources that can support international faculty in improving their accent, fluency, and pronunciation of English language. Furthermore, other avenues such as the new faculty orientation can be used to identify foreign born faculty who may have the problem of unfamiliar accent. The identified faculty can then be provided with additional English language training and support.

E. Inclusion in Conferences

Conferences, workshops, and symposia are good ways to generate scholarly ideas, discuss existing problems, and find solutions. When a particular educational problem or issue is included in a conference track, there is a higher probability that the problem will receive the desired awareness, analysis, but also contributions to its solution. Based on these, it was recommended that conferences that focus on education, such as Frontiers in Education (FIE) and American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE), should include more workshops, tracks, and satellite events that focus on accent as an instructional barrier.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thanks to Dr. Steven Frezza, Professor of Software Engineering, Gannon University, and Co-Chair of FIE 2016 for the guidance, support, and encouragement during the preparation of this 3C session. I will also like to thank Dr. Edward F. Gehringer from Department of Computer Science, North Carolina State University, and Waterloo Tsutsui from the School of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Purdue University for their participation and contribution in the discussion.

REFERENCES

- [1] H. C. Alberts, "The challenges and opportunities of foreign-born instructors in the classroom." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 189 – 203, 2008.
- [2] K. E. Foote, W. Li, J. Monk, and R. Theobald, "Foreign-born scholars in us universities: issues, concerns, and strategies." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 167–178, 2008.