

Foreign-born Faculty Members’ Teaching Experience in U.S. Mass Communication and Journalism Programs: How They Navigate Challenges

*By Masudul Biswas**

This study has explored pedagogical challenges that international faculty confront teaching in U.S. journalism and mass communication programs, the strategies they adopt to address some of those challenges and what roles an institution and campus diversity play as they navigate challenges. By interviewing 12 foreign-born journalism and mass communication faculty, this study has identified prejudices and misperceptions about international faculty, their accent and lack of teaching preparedness can emerge as pedagogical challenges. This research also documents the strategies that international faculty adopt to navigate these pedagogical challenges. Foreign-born faculty members also think that student diversity in the classrooms positively impacts their teaching experience on a campus.

Keywords: foreign-born faculty, global diversity, pedagogy, communication education, U.S. universities

Introduction

International faculty in U.S. universities not only brings global perspectives to their teaching and research but also contributes to institutional diversity as well as global competitiveness of a university (Munene, 2014; Webber & Yang, 2014). Simultaneously, international faculty members confront a unique set of challenges and adjustment issues in a new work environment outside their home countries (Herget, 2016; Duru & Akinro, 2020). Past research delves into institutional support as well as the strategies that international faculty can adopt for adjustments to a new work environment and address challenges (Kim et al., 2012; Munene, 2014).

Foreign-born faculty members can be an asset for a journalism and communication program that wishes to achieve an accreditation standard focusing on global diversity. One of the nine accreditation standards set by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) is, “The unit has an inclusive program that values domestic and global diversity, and serves and reflects society” (ACEJMC, n.d.). International faculty members can enrich global diversity education in communication programs. Therefore, research in this paper examines the challenges international faculty encounter when they

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teach in journalism and communication programs in U.S. universities and how they navigate those challenges.

In the U.S., the foreign-born population is anyone who is “not a U.S. citizen by birth,” including naturalized U.S. citizens (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). International faculty who over the time become U.S. citizens are considered as foreign-born U.S. citizens. Therefore, in this paper two terms – international faculty and foreign-born faculty – are used interchangeably.

Foreign-born Faculty Experience in U.S. Universities

Foreign-born faculty contribute to the internationalization of higher education in U.S. that enhances the breadth of student learning (Webber & Yang, 2014; Bedenlier & Zawacki-Richter, 2015). In addition to their contribution to student learning, foreign-born faculty who completed their undergraduate education in another country are generally more productive in terms of research and publications than their U.S.-born peers and foreign-born professors who earned their undergraduate degrees from U.S. universities (Kim et al., 2011; Webber, 2012; Mamiseishvili, 2010). Despite their contribution to U.S. academia, foreign-born faculty confront more challenges and adjustment issues in the beginning of their teaching career compared to their pre-tenured U.S.-born counterparts (Alberts, 2008).

A number of past studies have identified these pedagogical challenges that international faculty need to deal with when they teach: their accent and language issue, prejudices and biases against them, and adjustment to U.S. academic system (Duru & Akinro, 2020; Herget, 2016; Kim et al., 2011; Manrique and Manrique, 1999). Though a non-teaching experience is not the focus of this paper, dealing with immigration process and experience of social exclusion in the academic department could add additional stress for some international faculty members that may indirectly impact their academic activities (Theobald, 2013; Corley & Sabharwal, 2007; Gahungu, 2007). International faculty experience also depends on geographic location of the campus and diversity on campus. Herget (2016) argues that teaching undergraduate students on non-urban, less diverse campuses could be more challenging for international faculty as students may not have much exposure to *foreign accent* (Herget, 2016). Therefore, international faculty often receive low score in students' course evaluation mainly because of their accent. In some cases, as Herget (2016) argues, students blame international faculty member's accent even for not doing their part in a class, such as asking the instructor questions for clarification and working on their assignments properly. Lee and Janda (2006) argue that foreign-born and minority faculty are not well-accepted by some students in less-diverse campuses where faculty and students are predominantly white.

Past research also recognized that skewed perceptions of U.S.-born students, faculty and administrators can impact international faculty experience. *Stereotypes and prejudices* about international faculty such less credible based on their nationality, race and accent can impact their work (Manrique and Manrique, 1999;

Kim et al., 2011; Duru & Akinro, 2020). Some students evaluate international lecturers based on their prejudices (Omiteru et al., 2018; Lee and Janda, 2006). Munene (2014) brings up the double standard of U.S. academia that appreciates international faculty for institution's global competitiveness and, simultaneously, overlooks the prevailing perception of international faculty as outsiders. Such experience of bias is also documented in research on faculty of color or minority faculty's academic experience. Sue et al. (2011) in their interview research reported that White students sometimes challenge the authority and knowledge of faculty of color in the classrooms. Similarly, past research also exposed biases against scholarly work by faculty of color. Some practices around tenure and promotion tends to delegitimize diversity-focused and interdisciplinary nature of research by faculty of color (Settles et al., 2022; Dotson, 2012; Bernal and Villalpando, 2002).

Additionally, in their beginning years of teaching, international faculty need to go through an adjustment process, such as navigating undergraduate student expectations and grading system and culture (Alberts, 2008; Corley & Sabharwal, 2007). In some countries, 70 – 80 percent on an assignment could be a higher grade, which is not a case in U.S. universities. Some international faculty members struggle to grapple with the situation when they find some undergraduate students expect higher grade compared to their level of efforts in an assignment (Alberts, 2008). Since students compare them with their U.S.-born peers they felt the pressure (Alberts, 2008; Corley and Sabharwal, 2007). In addition to preparing for teaching and designing and planning for courses and conducting research, such adjustment to new academic culture could be an added work for an international faculty member.

An international faculty member's job satisfaction and retention also depends on their overall experience on campus and in an academic department. Because of job dissatisfaction, more foreign-born U.S. faculty than U.S.-born faculty tend to leave their institution within five years after they get tenure (Kim et al., 2012). Therefore, it is recommended in a past study that the university administrators recognize the realities and professional interests of their international faculty, which can be different from U.S.-born faculty (Kim et al., 2012; Munene, 2014). Given the importance of such faculty experience and the fact that no past research reviewed for this study has explored international faculty experience in the context of communication and media discipline, this study seeks to explore:

RQ 1: What are the pedagogical challenges that foreign-born faculty members encounter while teaching at U.S. journalism and mass communication programs?

Some universities offer programs that can help international faculty members with some pedagogical challenges they encounter, such as accent reduction courses for foreign-born faculty (Herget, 2016). Some universities tailor pedagogical training sessions for non-native English speakers (Omiteru et al., 2018). Additionally, mentorship program and support from U.S. peers and administrators could be helpful in the adjustment of international faculty to a new campus and a new academic system (Foote, 2013). A department chairperson's role is key as a chair can guide a new international faculty members' faculty development process and set a tone for departmental culture of inclusion (Foote, 2013). A department

chair aware of an international faculty member's adjustment process can assign fewer new courses and less-involved committee assignments in the beginning years (Munene, 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to know:

RQ 2: How do international faculty navigate pedagogical challenges?

RQ 3: What roles an institution (i.e., university, academic unit) can play in supporting international faculty navigate challenges?

Method

This study uses interview method to identify responses to three research questions -- pedagogical challenges of foreign-born faculty members teaching in journalism and mass communication programs and how they go about addressing those challenges. A semi-structured interview format was used for this study to gather rich data and nuances about international faculty experiences. Following this interview format, the researcher uses a same set of open-ended questions to gather information from the respondents (Appendix I) and asks additional or follow-up questions during interviews for the purpose of clarification and further explanation on an observation or comment made by an interviewee.

Fourteen foreign-born faculty members teaching in 12 different journalism or mass communication programs in U.S. were interviewed for this study. A past research on the experience of faculty of color in Predominantly White institution (PWI) that also used a similar qualitative interview method recruited eight faculty of color (Sue et al., 2011). This study uses two criteria for recruiting faculty members for interviews – completion of their undergraduate education outside the U.S. and their obtaining of graduate degrees (including Ph.D.) from a U.S. university. Foreign-born faculty who had gone through undergraduate education in U.S. universities became more Americanized than those who have just graduate school experience in U.S. (Kim et al., 2012). In selecting interviewees, a snowball technique was used. Author of this paper reached out to a member of academic association's international communication division. With the help of that member, author gathered a list of international faculty. During the interviews, two interviewees shared more names of international faculty that also can be interviewed.

Since there may have prejudices among some members of university community about certain countries or regions (Duru and Akinro, 2020; Omiteru et al., 2018; Lee and Janda, 2006), it is important to listen to the experiences of a diverse group of international faculty members. Purposefully-selected interviewees in this study are originally from these global regions and continents – Africa, East Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, and South Asia. Of these 14 interviewees, two faculty were from Africa, two faculty from East Asia, two faculty from Europe, two faculty from Latin America, two faculty from Middle East, and four faculty from South Asia. Snowball technique was also used purposefully to identify interviewees from various regions.

In accordance with the informed consent agreement, this paper will not include interview participants' names and institutional affiliations. A number of

interviewees became naturalized U.S. citizens. They were working either as a tenured or a tenure-track faculty member in the universities located in South, Midwest and Northeast. Of them, 10 faculty taught in public universities and four faculty taught in private universities during the time of interviews between 2020 - 2022. Eight of these faculty were teaching at institutions that were located in urban and demographically diverse areas. The interview pool was consisted of eight male and six female faculty members. Four of these faculty members were teaching at a program accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). Interviewees in this research had a different level of teaching experience in U.S. universities. During the time of the interview, 10 out of 14 interviewees were teaching at a U.S. university for 5 – 15 years. Three interviewees were within first and second years of teaching as tenure-track faculty who previously taught as a doctoral student in their degree-granting institutions. One faculty member was teaching over 20 years at a U.S. university.

A thematic content analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the interview transcripts in two themes -- pedagogical challenges and pedagogical strategies. Scope of *pedagogical challenges* theme includes information about faculty experience with difficult situations, biases against them and adjustment struggle. Information such as how foreign-born faculty address those challenges, such as pedagogical techniques and utilization of institutional support, was grouped under *pedagogical strategies* theme.

Findings

Pedagogical Challenges

Identifying pedagogical challenges that international faculty encounter was the focus of RQ 1. Based on the interviews, this research has identified these pedagogical challenges that foreign-born faculty need to deal with while teaching at a U.S. university: lack of preparedness for undergraduate teaching, accent, experience of social exclusion and loneliness, prejudices and biases, and lack of college preparedness among students.

Teaching Training

A faculty member observed that teaching undergraduate classes is one of the major responsibilities for a new faculty member in U.S. universities, but not all international faculty members always get enough teaching experience at their doctoral-granting institutions. In some programs, unlike U.S.-born doctoral students, international doctoral students do not get enough opportunities to teach a variety of undergraduate courses. International faculty can be familiar with graduate class environment because of their graduate education in U.S. universities; however, teaching undergraduate students can pose newer challenges for them.

Accent

Another common challenge that international faculty confront is with their accent or how they speak English. Five faculty members interviewed in this research mentioned that they had some difficulty communicating with students because of their pronunciation in their beginning years of teaching. One faculty member specifically mentioned that she received low score in course evaluation in her first year because of her accent. Another faculty member who later became a department chair on a less-diverse campus sees negative comments about international faculty members' accent in course evaluation. Remaining faculty members brought up the accent issue, but they did not find it a challenge for communicating with students at a relatively more diverse college campus and a campus in urban setting.

Lack of College Preparedness among Students

International faculty members find lack of college preparedness among undergraduate students another challenge that they share with their U.S.-born counterparts. Foreign-born faculty in their beginning semesters of teaching do not know how to manage expectations for academically struggling students. Simultaneously, they worry about poor course evaluation since course evaluation and maintaining a full-time faculty position and immigration status are interconnected. One faculty member had to lower her standards in terms of expectations in an assignment, e.g. requiring students to include two sources instead of four sources in a news writing class. She also criticized the teaching techniques advanced by her university's Center for Teaching and Learning. She observed that some of the Center's suggested strategies are to please students and make them comfortable while taking the attention away from the substance. It is important to note that faculty experience with quality of students can vary campus to campus.

Prejudices

International faculty members experience prejudices about them. While teaching news writing and media writing courses, two faculty members received negative comments from the students in the course evaluation as well as in the classrooms for correcting students' grammar and writing. They both felt that some students were offended since foreign-born professors had to correct their English writing. Such reaction comes from some students' misperception that foreign-born faculty may not be good in English.

Prejudices about international faculty is also connected with another student perception that they may not be a credible professor. An international faculty member commented that "Students do not expect from you much as you are an international [faculty]." He thinks that some students, particularly on a less diverse campus, tend to think that an international lecturer is not knowledgeable enough. Some students may not know that an international faculty member's native

language could be English. Another faculty member received a negative feedback on his teaching of cross-cultural journalism course because of his Middle Eastern heritage. This same faculty member also experienced an implicit bias on a more diverse campus. For example, though he made it clear to a student to address him as “Dr.” multiple times, that student keeps calling him “Mr.” From his colleagues and students he often hears, “I do not understand what you are you trying to say” though his English accent is very clear. His department chair “jokingly” told him “We do not want ISIS to recruit you” when he sought immigration support from the department.

Such student perception and implicit bias against certain foreign-born faculty members can cause stress, anxieties and job dissatisfaction among international faculty. For example, a dissatisfied faculty interviewed in this study left her former university within two years after receiving tenure and promotion. She kept doing more research to keep herself employable. At the end, she was offered a faculty position at a more-diverse institution.

Strategies to Address Challenges

RQ 2 was asked to identify strategies that international faculty adopt to address pedagogical challenges. In interviews, international faculty shared their strategies in addressing some of the pedagogical challenges they encounter such as how they deal with their accent when they teach and how they navigate prejudices about them.

Dealing with Accent

Foreign-born faculty themselves take various other approaches to make their communication and lecture understandable to students. After receiving some negative feedbacks in the beginning semester of her full-time teaching career, a faculty member would proactively read students’ nonverbal cues, e.g. facial expression, to get an idea when her instruction is not clear to the students. She would then repeat the instruction again or write the terms on PowerPoint slides or white board. In addition to these strategies, another foreign-born faculty would ask his students to repeat in American accent what he has said. Four foreign-born faculty mentioned that even after teaching for several years they still inform their students about accent on the first day of a semester and advise them to ask questions if the instruction is not clear. An experienced faculty member reflects on this accent issue differently. He thinks that orientation with his accent is an important skill for U.S. students to work in a globalized society.

Countering the Perception of Being Less Credible

Being perceived as “less credible” educator, mainly because of their country of origin and distinct accent, is a common feeling or experience many foreign-born faculty members encounter, particularly on a less diverse, conservative campus. Some international faculty think that they need to prove their expertise and

credibility to the students even they have been teaching for several years. Taking such prevailing perception into consideration, a faculty member teaching at a less diverse campus shares his strategy to demonstrate his credibility to the students. His strategy is aligned with how some other faculty members prepare for teaching a topic/course on diversity to avoid biases. He brings in “a lot of context” which includes additional historical background to the discussion of religion and media. Despite not being a Christian, he shares his knowledge on Christianity with the students. For example, in his lecture, he tells his students that it is very common in U.S. to hear the use of Christians and Catholics separately; both are forms of Christianity and the Catholics were there for over 1000 years before reformers like Martin Luther came around. He said, “I bring in [this type of] knowledge so that [students] understand this guy is not talking trash.” He wants his students to recognize that he is a knowledgeable person, and he does not always need to refer to a textbook.

Another faculty member, who grew up in India and had journalism experience in both India and U.S., finds that some students at a university in South did not find her journalism experience in India credible enough for a news writing course instructor. In her first semester of teaching news writing course, several students challenged her teaching of a storytelling structure when she was using the common textbook used by a U.S.-born faculty member in another section of news writing class. Since she had some journalism experience in U.S. between her masters and doctoral education, she began to highlight her U.S. journalism experience to present herself credible to the students.

International faculty members teaching diversity and cultural studies courses in mass communication programs feel that sometimes some students do not think that they have enough lived experience to teach such courses. In teaching a diversity course, these faculty members also face accusation of being biased by white students. Two international faculty members who teach diversity courses in journalism programs said that they spent more time preparing for their course or topic on diversity than other types of courses and topics to avoid any form of cultural biases. They incorporate research and additional background information into their lectures and presentation while sharing contemporary examples to explain the quality of cultural and racial representation. One faculty member mentioned, she thinks a lot before how she will articulate a response to a question on race and cultural difference. Another faculty member, who teaches cultural difference between Eastern and Western Cultures in an advertising class, trains her students with evidence-based approach, such as use of wide range of reference materials, to avoid cultural bias in classroom discussion and assignments on cultural differences. She thinks that her lecture on cultural differences, based statistics, research and industry reports, is a model for her students to replicate. No student had questioned her for being a culturally biased.

One faculty member mentioned that *teaching innovations* such as creating a new course and reviving an existing course in department's curriculum can get an international faculty member noticed in the department. Teaching innovation shows a faculty member's strength or expertise in the curriculum.

Institutional Support

Through RQ 3, this study sought to know about the institutional support international faculty can receive to navigate pedagogical challenges. According to the interviews, international faculty members' adjustment to U.S. academic system depends on institutional support and culture. Faculty interviewees appreciated mentorship, collegiality in the department, and pedagogical training programs on campus.

Mentoring Program

Not all faculty members interviewed had a mentor assigned to him or her when they first began a full-time faculty position. For other faculty members, their departments or colleges assigned a mentor for them to offer guidance on first-year experience, tenure and promotion expectations, and teaching. Faculty members who did not have official mentors had to find a colleague or multiple colleagues in and outside their departments to seek advice and feedbacks on teaching approaches, advising, and course materials. Additionally, one faculty member sought mentoring from his professional association.

Departmental Support

All faculty interviewees, except one faculty member, experienced supportive colleagues in their departments, which was helpful for their transition into a new place. A faculty member said that his colleagues shared their syllabi with him and emailed him with their offer and availability for any assistance. A faculty member who did not have a pleasant experience with her first institution described her sentiment, "No support or guidance . . . Being international was adding insult to an injury. Chair was not helpful." One time when she brought her course evaluation to the chair's attention, she did not receive much help. Instead, her chair pointed out that her teaching score is one of the two lowest scores in the department.

University-Level Programming

About the institutional support they receive on pedagogical training, three faculty members were happy with the programs offered by their universities' professional development entities such as the Center for Faculty Success and the Teaching and Learning Center. They found these pedagogical training helpful for them as they were able to get insights on how to effectively administer both online and in-person classes and how to write a detailed class assignment clearly. One faculty member found new faculty orientation week sessions on grading, course material development and virtual class design very helpful.

Conclusions

Similar to past research this study has identified prejudices among some students about faculty competence and accent issues as pedagogical challenges for foreign-born faculty members. Additionally, this research reveals another pedagogical challenge for international faculty teaching in a journalism and mass communication program – lack of teaching preparedness at undergraduate level. Some foreign-born doctoral students do not get as much opportunity to teach as their U.S.-born peers to gain a wide range of undergraduate teaching experience. Some of the challenges that international faculty encounter on U.S. college campuses are similar to the experiences by U.S.-born faculty of color, such as prejudices about their authority on the subject matter.

Additionally, a number of faculty, who taught in universities in rural areas and small towns, felt the pressure to *prove* their expertise and competence to the students every semester regardless of how long they have been teaching. This finding about international faculty experience is similar to experiences reported in past research, such as questioning faculty of color's authority on a subject matter (Sue et al., 2011) and scholarly devaluation (Settles et al., 2022). However, majority of the interviewees, who taught in universities located in urban and more diverse campuses, did not feel that way. Geographic location of college campuses (urban vs. rural) and level of student diversity might have influenced varied level of experiences as international faculty. Eight faculty interviewed in this research were teaching in universities located in urban areas and college campuses with more diversity.

Though an association between faculty members' racial identity and country of origin and their academic experience at a U.S. university was not one of the main areas of investigation in this study, it is alluded in the interviews how the experience of some non-European international faculty was different from a white international faculty with a country of origin in Europe. A faculty member with a country of origin in Middle East, two faculty members from countries in Africa and one South Asian faculty member shared their bias examples that had to do with their race/ethnicity and country of origin.

The idea behind ACEJMC's diversity standards as well as global diversity on campus is university community, particularly the students, will benefit from foreign-born faculty members' global perspectives. But when a faculty member feels not credible to the students for their international professional experience in a developing or least developed country, it fails the purpose of global diversity on campus. In such cases, support from the department and mentorship could be helpful. But faculty mentorship is a formal program on all college campuses.

Foreign-born faculty adopt various strategies to address pedagogical challenges with accent and misperceptions about them among some students. They also utilize institutional resources such as the teaching and faculty development centers. In the process, they also find mentoring in the department, department chair's guidance and advice from supportive colleagues helpful in their adjustment as a new faculty member.

Not necessarily a foreign-born faculty needs to teach a global communication class or global diversity topic to share firsthand international professional experience with students. Rather, having a foreign-born faculty in classrooms can itself be an international experience for students. Sometimes orientation with a foreign accent can be an important skill and experience to have to work in a globalized world.

If universities truly care about sustaining international diversity on campus, its retention plan and professional development programs should recognize the situation and realities of foreign-born faculty. A welcoming environment in the department is important for the retention of an international faculty member, too.

Future Research

A future expansion of this research can focus on how diversity on campus and multicultural initiatives on campus can impact international faculty experience. A university with strong study abroad programs, higher level of student and faculty diversity and vibrant affinity groups programming could positively impact international faculty experience. Foreign-born faculty have more positive experience in a more diverse campus than a less diverse campus (Herget, 2016; Nealy, 2009). As it is alluded in various interviews conducted for this research, foreign-born faculty experiences on U.S. college campuses are not always negative and their teaching experience can be positive on a diverse campus. Expansion of this research could also explore the support foreign-born and educated faculty receive from other foreign-born and American-born tenured faculty members.

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Appendix I

Interview Question Guide

Please respond to the following questions on your teaching experience as an international faculty (i.e., foreign-born academic) in a communication and journalism discipline at a U.S. University/College. If a question does not apply to you, please respond with “Not Applicable or N/A.” A number of past research (Duru and Akinro, 2020; Omiteru et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2011; Munene, 2014) informed the development of the following question guide:

Questions on Interviewee’s/Participant’s Backgrounds

1. Institutional Affiliation?
2. Is it a public or private institution?
3. Academic Rank (e.g. Associate Professor)?
4. Gender?
5. Country of Origin?
6. Academic discipline (e.g. Journalism)?
7. Is it an ACEJMC-accredited program? ACEJMC stands for Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.
8. How long have you lived in the United States?
9. How long have you been a full-time university faculty?
10. Did you earn your graduate education from a U.S. university? If so, what is/are the name(s) of the university/universities?
11. How many institutions have you worked for thus far as a full-time faculty?
How long have you been working in your current institution?
12. What did you use to do professionally before moving to U.S.?

Teaching and Career-focused Questions:

13. Can you explain some of the challenges you have encountered teaching as an international faculty at a U.S. university?

14. Were you able to address the challenges you mentioned in response to Q.13? If yes, how did you resolve them? If no, how do you cope with such challenges?
15. Did you teach a course on diversity or global issues in communication or media? If so, what was your experience of teaching that course in terms of student evaluation and your personal satisfaction?

If it is applicable in your case, how do you bring in your professional experience of working in another country to U.S. students?
16. How diverse is your major's student body and faculty? Depending on how diverse your program is, how did it impact your teaching and other academic activities on campus?
17. What were the roles of your department colleagues and the university to help with your transition to teaching at a new institution?
18. As an international faculty member, did you feel you were treated differently from other faculty members who are not international? If so, how?
19. Did your university/department assign a mentor? Or did you seek mentoring from somewhere else? Are/were you happy with the guidance you received on how to be successful with teaching and tenure and promotion process?

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