

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: IMPACT OF ASYNCHRONOUS AND TEXT-BASED COMMUNICATION MODALITIES ON NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN FULLY ONLINE U.S. UNIVERSITY COURSES

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The number of fully online courses and degree programs offered by U.S. institutions has risen sharply in the past ten years and is expected to continue to rise. For a variety of reasons, including changing U.S. demographics and post-9/11 visa restrictions, the number of non-native speakers of English who enroll in U.S. online courses may increase. One of the principal features of most online courses is a reliance on asynchronous, text-based communication. In traditional "face-to-face" courses, students who are non-native speakers of English must comprehend rapid, often idiomatic English as spoken by the instructor and the other students. Further, they must also be able to produce understandable spoken English utterances themselves in order to respond to questions or participate in discussions. This synchronous, largely aural/spoken communication presents certain challenges to non-native speaker students depending upon their level of English proficiency and the

nature of their culturally-driven classroom behaviors. In contrast, many fully online courses use a heavily text-based, asynchronous communication model based on modalities such as threaded conferencing and e-mail. This model would seem to mitigate some of the challenges of real-time, spoken communication. Some writers have suggested that, for this reason, non-native speaker students may actually prefer the asynchronous online format; there is, however, a paucity of empirical evidence to support the suggestion.

This study sought to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data to confirm or refute that suggestion, and to identify interventions and other student services to maximize this student population's chances of success in the online environment. The study used a mixed methods approach involving a survey of undergraduate students at UMUC as well as interviews of selected survey participants. Analysis of the data indicated that some non-native speaker students do prefer the fully online format and its asynchronous, text-based communication paradigm. The reasons for this preference included the general convenience of online study as well as the asynchronicity and permanence of the classroom-based communication channels. The data suggest, however, that the notion of a generalized preference for online over face-to-face U.S. university classes by this population of students is still speculative.