

Translation as Charitable Currency: Exploring Linguistic Philanthropy from International Students and Alumni

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Introduction

Decades of extant research has suggested that higher education—in the United States (US) and beyond—has become increasingly internationalized, meaning that students have chosen to leave their home countries in pursuit of higher education (Altbach and Knight 2007). However, the bulk of research on the international student experience has overwhelmingly focused on why international students choose to leave home (Beech 2015), how international students choose institutions of higher education (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002), and international students' experiences within institutions of higher education (Mamiseishvili 2012). As a critical source of institutional health—in both fiscal and cultural terms—alumni giving is an important area of scholarship that has been understudied among international education scholars, even though the impact of international students on their host countries and institutions has been well documented. In short, little is known about how international alumni are asked to give back to their alma mater.

Of the few studies somewhat related to international student philanthropy, researchers have primarily focused on alumni giving from international universities in non-US countries, such as Azerbaijan (Abbasov and Drezner 2018), international alumni from specific countries, such as China (Tsunoda 2013), and how U.S. institutions and other elite international institutions could adopt philanthropic strategies from universities in other countries (Johnstone 2004; Warren and Bell 2014). Drezner's (2013) edited book titled, *Expanding the Donor Base in Higher Education: Engaging Non-Traditional Donors*, touched upon alumni giving from African American alumni, Latina/o alumni, and Chinese American alumni, but did not explicitly explore international student giving and whether international students have been asked by their alma mater to provide money, service, or another form of cultural capital, such as facilitating internships or job placement. Only Coleman's (1997) essay touched upon international student philanthropy to U.S. institutions, briefly stating that international alumni from U.S. institutions "can be a source of referrals for additional students as well as for gifts and donations to the university" (Coleman 1997, 52). No studies have explored how U.S. institutions solicit philanthropic gifts from their international students and international alumni from diverse countries. More specifically, no research has investigated what these international students and alumni are asked to give, whether it be a monetary gift, referrals to jobs or internships, or what my study proposes to investigate: linguistic philanthropy.

Although higher education has continued to internationalize, the language of international higher education has remained predominantly English, as recent studies have found that over 90% of US institutions provide international admissions materials in English-only (Taylor 2018) and rarely provide translated content of any kind for international students (Taylor and Bicak 2019). It is therefore remarkable that higher education has continued to internationalize despite the considerable language barriers facing some international students seeking access to institutions of higher education beyond their home country. Coupling the importance of alumni giving and the dominance of Anglocentric communication in international higher education, I propose to research English-language learning international alumni from predominantly English institutions of higher education to answer the following research questions:

- 1.) How do English-language learning international alumni view alumni giving and philanthropy?
- 2.) How have U.S. institutions solicited charitable donations from English-language learning international alumni and what specific donations have been solicited?
- 3.) How do English-language learning international alumni perceive linguistic philanthropy and are they willing to provide this form of philanthropy to their alma mater in lieu of more traditional forms of alumni giving, such as monetary gifts?

Proposed Methodology

To explore how international alumni from predominantly English institutions of higher education view alumni giving, I have been networking with international offices nestled within institutions of higher education across the United States, including in states with large international student populations, such as Texas, California, New York, and Florida. Utilizing in-depth focus groups (or one-on-one interviews, if feasible), I want to investigate how institutions of higher education engage with English-language learning international alumni and how these alumni are specifically asked to contribute to their alma mater in the form of philanthropy. As a result, I plan to first use convenience sampling methods to arrange conversations with as many international alumni as possible, prioritizing international alumni who are bilingual, instead of international alumni who may only speak English, such as international alumni from England or other predominantly English-speaking countries.

I will also need to be sensitive to the fact that international alumni from US institutions are far from a homogenous population, and thus, hold incredibly diverse linguistic identities and likely had incredibly diverse postsecondary experiences while studying at their alma mater. In addition, international students often pay much more tuition than domestic students, and therefore, these students may view philanthropy differently than domestic students. To optimize generalizability, I will attempt to recruit the largest and most diverse pool of international alumni for this project, appropriately reflecting the diverse identities and experiences of these people.

During the interviews and/or focus groups, I plan to ask questions related to alumni giving and international alumni perceptions of philanthropy. These questions may include, “How do you feel toward giving back to your alma mater?” and “How has your alma mater engaged with you in terms of alumni giving and/or philanthropy?” Building from their responses, I will explicitly explore my notion of linguistic philanthropy, asking the international alumni “Has your alma mater asked you to translate admissions and onboarding communication for English-language learning international students (linguistic philanthropy)?” If these alumni have been asked, I would probe by inquiring, “What specific linguistic labor has your alma mater asked you to perform?” If not, I would investigate further by asking, “Would you be interested in providing your alma mater with culturally responsive and native translations of this communication (e.g., a Tagalog speaker translating English to Tagalog for prospective international students from the Philippines) in lieu of monetary giving?”

I will hypothesize that many institutions of higher education view their English-language learning international alumni as sources of financial resources and not as sources of valuable community cultural wealth and linguistic capital. In short, I do not believe U.S. institutions of higher education recruit linguistic philanthropy, nor do I believe international alumni would be opposed to providing linguistic philanthropy in lieu of more traditional forms of alumni giving, such as Coleman’s “referrals for additional students as well as for gifts and donations to the university” (Coleman 1997, 52). As a result, I will adopt a critical lens while examining how institutions of higher education extract labor or financial resources from their international alumni, paying close attention to whether this labor or these financial resources perpetuates Anglocentrism so pervasive within institutions of higher education in the United States.

Impact on Comparative and International Higher Education

Many English-language learning international alumni may have made considerable economic sacrifices in order to attend a US institution of higher education. Moreover, international students often face considerable hurdles toward financing their postsecondary studies, including no access to US federal student aid, typically routine and long-distance travel, unfavorable exchange rates, and other financial barriers. Upon graduation, if these alumni are asked to continue to contribute to the financial health of the institution instead of sharing their culture—and their linguistic capital through linguistic philanthropy—with their institution, these alumni could feel disenfranchised by a predominantly English-speaking education system in the United States. In lieu of a financial contribution that may fund a student scholarship or capital project, international alumni could make everlasting gifts to their alma mater in the form of translation of international student-focused communication. To slow the effects of academic capitalism and the positioning of students as consumers and sources of income (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), linguistic capital and philanthropy must be viewed as a contribution to an institution of higher education, thus opening the door to higher education for future generations of English-language learning international students.

Main Takeaway and Conclusion

If higher education is to continue its internationalization in the future, I firmly believe that polylingual student-focused communication is the path forward. Although machine translation and artificial intelligence technologies have emerged in recent years, these machines have been found to be only somewhat accurate and not nearly as reliable as native translations (Ducar and Schocket 2018; Taylor 2018). Yet, the linguistic capital of international students and alumni has been present for generations: US institutions must begin to value this capital, and thus, the culture of their international students and alumni. To become more inclusive and supportive of international students and international alumni, US institutions of higher education ought to embrace this linguistic capital as they should, slowly dismantling an Anglocentric system of education and being. Ideally, this research will give voice to international alumni, so that they may give their alma maters a polylingual voice to speak with people in any language.

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