

LANGUAGE AND ACADEMIC IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF NON- NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores the experiences of non-native English-speaking international students regarding language, culture and identity in the context of their graduate studies. Interviews were conducted with each of the eight participants. Interpretive analysis was used within a constructivist frame. The findings of this study are organized into four themes of the participants' experiences: Mastering the language: *You know you sound wrong*, The meaning of language proficiency: *English is alive*, Language and academic identity: *I feel I'm in-between*, and Joining a new community of practice: *You have to start all over again*. Implications of the study suggest that language and cultural identity are central to the academic experience of non-native speakers. Recommendations emphasize the importance of learner-centered instructional design in addressing these needs.

For many decades, international students have been a growing presence within the student body in American universities. The Institute of International Education has collected data on international student enrollment in the United States since 1919 and in the form of the Open Doors survey since 1954 (Open Doors, n.d.). The 2007-2008 report indicates a national ascending trend with 7% increase from the previous year to a record number of 623,805 (Institute of International Education, 2008). As American universities continue to attract international students as well as expand into

global markets, this growing community deserves attention as its members are legitimate contributors to the academic communities of practice in the U.S.

Research addressing questions about international graduate students has largely focused on identifying the difficulties these students faced and has centered on the so-called “problem framework” and recommendations for improving the academic experience of international students (Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Ridley, 2004). Researchers in the United States as well as the United Kingdom and Australia identified problems including stress, alienation, and difficulties in adjusting to the host culture (Cadman, 2000; Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Ridley, 2004; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). Lee and Rice (2007) identified greater problems for black international students than for white international students. In four reviewed studies, the perceptions of international graduate students were compared to expectations of their instructors/mentors/tutors and findings revealed confusion and associated problems (Belcher, 1994; Cadman, 2000; Ridley, 2004; Robertson et al., 2000). Across all studies reviewed, proficiency with the English language was identified as a key factor in shaping international students’ experiences. And yet this topic has not been fully explored. In fact, there is a dearth of research in the higher education literature that looks in-depth at how international students join the academic community of practice and adjust to the host society through the lens of language experience. How do international students make meaning of their experiences with the English language? How do they construct their identities in a new environment using English as a new language? These are questions that require further attention and can inform higher education policy.

This phenomenological study explores the experiences of non-native English speaking international students regarding language, culture and identity in the context of their graduate studies at a large research university in the Southeast. In this paper we first explain our paradigmatic orientations regarding this research. We describe the method, research site, participants and data collection approach and then present our findings, highlighting four themes of the participants’ experiences: Mastering the language: *You know you sound wrong*, The meaning of language proficiency: *English is alive*, Language and academic identity: *I feel I’m in-between*, and Joining a new community of practice: *You have to start all over again*.

We conclude with a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for graduate instructors.

PARADIGMATIC ORIENTATION

We position ourselves within the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is defined by Lincoln (2005) as “an interpretive stance which attends to the meaning-making activities of active agents and cognizing human beings” (p. 60). Our constructivist orientation towards the world enhances the phenomenological approach that we used in this study with the intention of understanding how our participants make meaning of their experiences.

Clearly, our lived experiences shaped our understanding of the phenomenon investigated. An important step in the phenomenological approach is bracketing, which is defined as the researcher’s “attempt to suspend or put in abeyance [her] preconceptions and presuppositions (i.e., one’s biases)” (Valle, King & Halling, 1989, p. 10). Phenomenological researchers bracket their assumptions by explicitly raising them to the level of reflective awareness (Valle, King & Halling, 1989). However, this process is not a warrant of the researcher’s objectivity, but an attempt to make the research transparent.

The idea of this study is rooted in one of the researchers’ life experience. Three years ago she left her home country, Romania, to pursue graduate studies in the United States. She studied English as a foreign language for approximately nine years as part of her secondary schooling. In the year previous to her arrival in the U.S., she undertook intensive study of English in order to prepare for the TOEFL and GRE tests. Hence, by the time of her admission to graduate school she felt proficient in English. During her first semester of graduate school she started to become aware of her perceptions of using English as primary means of communication. One of her first perceptions was that her voice seemed softer in English than in Romanian. Another insight occurred when she and her husband tried to use English in their private conversations. After a few “dry” discussions they gave up, realizing that their English lacked affect/emotions. On the other hand, communication in English did not seem as artificial with people with whom she had never spoken a language other than English.

After her first project presentation in one of her classes, when

she felt like an actor badly performing a scripted role, she finally realized what was happening; she noticed that she seemed to switch between her Romanian identity, which came naturally, and her English one, which continued to feel artificial. She became interested in finding out more about the experiences of international students using English, especially after noting that other international students, with whom she discussed the topic, did not seem to share her experiences.

The other two researchers also have experience living in other countries, one for nine months in Israel as a Fulbright Research Scholar and the other as a Peace Corps volunteer for 24 months in Lesotho, Southern Africa. While the Fulbright Scholar did not formally study Hebrew and instead was viewed by colleagues as a person with whom they could practice their English, she was continuously drawn to participants' statements in this research that resonated with her experiences on the other side, especially the fatigue of mismatched cultural identity. The returned Peace Corps Volunteer attained advanced-high proficiency in the Sesotho language while living in country, necessitated by being the only non-Basotho living within a six hour bus ride. She taught English in the village secondary school and continually navigated the intersections of language, culture and identity during her two years of service.

METHODS

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore international graduate student experiences using the English language. Hermeneutic phenomenology, the methodological approach of this study, seeks to discover the essence of a phenomenon by examining its particular manifestations (Van Manen, 1990). One of the philosophical assumptions underlying phenomenology is that understanding of the constant structure of the phenomenon is possible only after its repeated perceptions in various contexts (Valle, King, and Halling, 1989).

The participants were eight international graduate students at a large public research university, situated in a medium-size southeastern city, whose native language was other than English. We used a "combination or mixed purposeful sample" to select the participants (Hatch, 2002, p.98). Several criteria were used for the se-

lection of the participants: a) English was not their native language; b) the participants did not use English as their primary means of communication in the country of origin nor had they lived before in a country where English was the spoken language; and c) their experience of the phenomenon was recent (1-3 years). In addition, we tried to ensure the “maximum variation” of the sample (Hatch, 2002, p.50) by selecting participants who might have different perspectives on the phenomenon as they are from different countries.

Table 1. Description of participants

Participant's pseudonym	Country of origin	College	Degree Pursued	Duration of graduate study
Josh	Brazil	Education	Ph.D.	1.5 years
Tanya	China	Education	Ph.D.	1 year
Ben	China	Engineering	Ph.D.	1 year
Justin	South Korea	Arts and Sciences	Master's	1 year
Michael	Russia	Engineering	Ph.D.	1 year
Noemi	Thailand	Nursing	Ph.D.	1 year
Eliza	Turkey	Business Administration	Ph.D.	2 years
Ricardo	Venezuela	Arts and Sciences	Ph.D.	3 years

Participants from seven countries (Brazil, China, Korea, Russia, Turkey, Thailand, and Venezuela) were interviewed (see Table 1). The participants' age ranged from 24 to 38 years. Three of the participants were female students and five were male students. All but one of the participants were pursuing a Ph.D. degree at the time of the interview.

Access to participants was facilitated by the first researcher who was member of the international student community at the research site. The students were contacted through email or phone and asked to participate in a one-time interview. Based on initial agreement, interviews were held at a mutually convenient time and

place. The duration of the interviews ranged from 29 minutes to 66 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the first researcher. Data collection occurred between May, 2008 and September, 2008.

One-on-one in-depth interviews, as described by Moustakas (1994), were conducted. Each interview started with one open-ended question: "What was your experience like communicating and studying in English as a language that is not your native one?" The participants were asked to focus on their experience and then describe it fully for the interviewer. Subsequent questions, not specified in advance, followed with the intention to clarify, validate and summarize the participants' words. In this way, the interviewer engaged the interviewee in sharing salient experiences related to the research question in an attempt to understand the participant's perspective.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed using an interpretive approach (Hatch, 2002). Interpretive analysis is well suited to making sense of rich data obtained through less structured interviews and observations. Hatch suggests that research, such as hermeneutic phenomenology, done within a constructivist paradigm naturally fits in with interpretive analysis.

The steps of interpretive analysis proposed by Hatch (2002) were followed closely. Thus, all interviews were first read with the intention of gaining a sense of the whole. A subsequent reading of each interview aimed at recording impressions. The purpose of this stage of analysis was to explore the data in search of answers to the following questions, formulated based on an initial reading of the transcripts:

- What was going on for the international students in this academic setting?
- What did using the English language mean to them?
- How did they position themselves in the American society? How did they position themselves in relation to students from their country of origin and other international students?
- How did they construct their identity in this environment?

After impressions were recorded for the full set of interviews,

we formulated the interpretations as possible explanations of the interactions observed in the data. The next phase consisted of reading the interpretations and selecting the salient ones. Those considered relevant and informative based on the research questions were selected and further organized and reduced. Drafting a summary of the interpretations followed. Based on this draft, we identified excerpts from the transcripts that supported these initial interpretations. Then we compiled a rich description structured as four themes.

Several validation strategies were used (Creswell, 2007). From the beginning of the study we acknowledged our biases and articulated reflexivity statements. We presented some of our analysis of the data to members of a departmental research team to challenge our interpretation of the participants' meaning. We also provided thick descriptions of the participants, site, and data collection and analysis methods in order to make our research transparent and increase transferability of findings across settings.

FINDINGS

The findings provide a rich description of the experiences of non-native English speaking international students regarding language, culture and identity. They are organized into four themes: Mastering the language: *You know you sound wrong*, The meaning of language proficiency: *English is alive*, Language and academic identity: *I feel I'm in-between*, and Joining a new community of practice: *You have to start all over again*. Supporting excerpts from the interview transcripts are provided for each theme. These quotes are referenced by participants' pseudonyms and line numbers in the original transcripts.

Theme 1 - Mastering the language: *You know you sound wrong*

The participants spoke extensively about how they experienced the mechanics of communicating in English. They described having initial difficulties in understanding spoken American English in general and the Southern accent specifically. The participants were challenged by the diversity of accents even within the university setting, accounted for by the diverse national and international student and faculty population. The linguistic diversity was unexpected for some of them as English training in their home countries emphasized written skills over speaking ability. In addition, their

exposure to native spoken English was limited in their countries of origin. However, some of the participants did not lack exposure but still found it difficult to understand previously unheard accents. Several participants spoke explicitly about the difficulty of making sense of different accents:

... it was hard, when I first time came to New York City [port of entrance in the country] and I started to see that people actually cannot speak Russian, I finally realized that "OK, now I'm going to be in trouble" and that was really hard time for me. (Michael, 13-15)

They're children, so they don't speak as clearly as adults and Southern accent mixed with the African-American accent – I was completely lost – the kids would talk to me, I wouldn't understand a single word. It was terrible! (Josh, 176-181)

The experience of the first few months also included mutual interference of the two linguistic systems: native language and English. The participants reported constructing sentences in English using the grammatical structure of their native language and vice versa. For example, one of the participants described:

I'm talking with my family over the phone in Portuguese and I've been speaking English all the time and then you go talk to them and you know you sound wrong. It's something wrong with your grammar structure 'cause you use the English grammar structure to Portuguese and that's sounds wrong too. And the opposite is also true: when I spoke Portuguese for a long time and then I have to speak English again there is a weird period. (Josh, 151-155)

These "contaminated" linguistic constructions were seen in the larger context of language switching which was perceived by the participants as more common at the beginning of their time in the United States. The language switch was experienced by these participants as a type of bridging process between the areas of their brains that they perceived in charge of each linguistic system. Participants used expressions such as "my brain was just Turkish, communicating Turkish with me" (Eliza, 18-19) or "it's hard to get your brain to work in Portuguese again" (Josh, 147), perhaps as metaphors reflecting the difficulty of the process.

The international students were hindered from expressing their feelings in English. Although proficient in English, they perceived their vocabulary as limited when having to communicate the whole palette of human emotions and feelings:

I don't know; it's quite difficult when you're trying to express your feelings or your thoughts in another language. It's always difficult ... I think the problem is, since we are not native speakers, we don't know which word is describing best what we think. We are choosing some words but we don't know which one is the perfect thing for us ... (Eliza, 62-66)

Moreover, a similar phenomenon was experienced at times in the process of communicating ideas and knowledge. They felt restrained by their English ability to identify the words and expressions that would best convey the meaning they intended to transmit. They described the impediment of selecting appropriate words as resulting in "over-explanations" which they defined as using more words than necessary to make their point. One participant shared:

I get frustrated when I'm talking to my advisor and my professors about research and I can't get a point across. It's very frustrating 'cause you know what're talking about and it's a very interesting idea but I have to go around ... I feel that I'm using way more words than I should be and try to explain ... and then you over-explain it ... (Josh, 84-87)

In combination with feeling hindered in expressing thoughts in English, one of the participants emphasized the complete freedom of expression in his native language:

I'm always making mistakes [in English], grammar mistakes and pronunciation mistakes. And when I catch those mistakes I sort of try to go back and say the word again or something like that, but I don't need to do that in Spanish, of course. So, that feels really good. That's the feeling of freedom. (Ricardo, 205-207)

Although they reported communicating with fellow compatriots almost exclusively in their native language, the participants acknowledged that using their native language did not help them further develop their English vocabulary. Moreover, they talked

about suppressing communication in their native language and contact with their home country as a strategy to improve English speaking proficiency. Ben shared:

... we use Chinese. This is a bad thing and also a good thing. When we use Chinese it makes us, you know, not feel strangers in this country. But it makes us to take longer time to learn this language. (Ben, 16-19)

In summary, these participants' language experiences included the challenge of understanding diverse English accents, switching between two languages to make meaning, and the reduced ability to express feelings and thoughts in English.

Theme 2 - The meaning of language proficiency: *English is alive*

Findings in this theme were organized into two sub-themes: *Barrier and channel of access*, and *Game and reality* to reflect the participants' perception of the meaning of language proficiency.

Sub-theme 1: Barrier and channel of access

The participants perceived English as both a barrier and a channel of access to academic success. As a barrier, English hindered their expression and threatened their self-esteem. Some of the participants had difficulties expressing their feelings, ideas and knowledge due to limited English vocabulary. Michael's metaphor speaks of the deep impact of his perceived linguistic limitations:

It's bad because when you have such a feeling – that you're a stupid person – it just incredibly reduces your angle and you really feel like a small person, like a mouse in the church ... Well, that's really embarrassing ... (Michael, 124-126)

Josh shared a similar experience:

... after a while it's frustrating ... when you try to communicate in terms of academics ... and people think you don't know the topic just because you don't know the words. (Josh, 214-215)

In the academic setting they felt that they were not able to fully participate in class discussions, finding it difficult to select appropriate words in order to address questions. As a consequence they were initially perceived by instructors and peers as unknowledgeable and non-legitimate contributors to the learning community. One of the participants talked about this experience:

...you start to ask a question and you can hardly finish it because you feel that pressure of other guys who look at you and the professor himself does not understand your accent. (Michael, 210-212)

Michael placed a stronger emphasis on the hindering effect of using English by using the word "handicapped" to point out the potential this barrier had to endanger his academic success.

I don't wanna feel that bad feeling of being some kind of handicapped [person]. (Michael, 213)

At the same time, Michael revealed a proactive attitude in talking about English as a barrier. He spoke about fighting his fears to make his voice heard in class. He did engage the instructors in dialogue by asking questions.

English was also seen as a channel of access to other cultures, American and those of other international students. Accessing other cultures by speaking English was seen as a source of learning and self-development. English gave them access not only to the American culture but to cultures represented by other international students with whom they engaged in conversations. Apparently, perceiving English as access to learning was a subsequent phase to perceiving English as barrier in the international students' experience. English as a channel of access is illustrated by the following excerpt:

So, when I came here ... I saw the campus, I saw the people ... who are actually interested in your experiences being a citizen of another country. They were really interested in general conversation and they would ask you some things; you would share and you'd actually like to talk about ... (Michael, 156-159)

Thus, the participants perceived speaking English as a barrier when they did not have the vocabulary and proficiency to express their feelings, thoughts and knowledge. At the same time, English facilitated their access to learning and self-development. The next sub-theme highlights the experience of learning English as foreign language.

Sub-theme 2: Game and reality

English spoken in the United States revealed itself to the international students as "real" and "alive". This contrasted with their

perception of English as a foreign, un-real or even “game-like” language when spoken in their home countries. This perception seems to be connected with the idea that their native language acted as a safety net upon which the students could rely when “something went wrong” with English. Michael described the experience of English as a game:

... when you learn [English] in other countries you think that it's just some kind of game, not real. And you come here and people don't sometimes follow the grammar ... their informal language would confuse you 'cause you don't know what they're talking about. (Michael, 72-76)

Ben shared his perception of English as being “real” in the U.S.:

English is alive ... you are using it in normal life. Every experience is a new experience and maybe if you review this experience you are familiar with it when you meet it next time. (Ben, 126-128)

Justin, the participant from South Korea, shared a similar experience of English becoming meaningful only when spoken in an English speaking country. Moreover when examined against the background of “real” English, defined as English spoken by native speakers, his own linguistic production in English felt non-authentic.

My own English expression is not American English, right? I can make my own sentence in English but it's not like real English expression. (Justin, 24-25)

The transition from “game-like” English to “real” English happened concomitantly with recognizing that their position in the new setting had changed. They could not afford any longer to “play” with English as a foreign language; they realized that it had become part of their new identity.

Theme 3 - Language and academic identity: *I feel I'm in-between*

Spontaneous comparisons with the “home” culture, which came up frequently during the interviews, revealed that international students made meaning of their experience in the American university by referring to their familiar educational system. The characteristics of the American educational system stood out for

them as they tried to negotiate the meaning of their new identity. As they navigated the intricacies of the new reality, “back home” became a frame of reference that seemed to provide a state of balance.

What stood out for them in this comparison were the discrepancies between the two cultures. Some of the participants talked about their new status quo as a “between the worlds” experience (Eliza), in which they appropriated only parts of the American culture rather than being fully engaged. At the same time, they critically evaluated their home culture and progressively renounced beliefs that they no longer valued. Eliza described the feeling of being caught between the two cultures:

I think I miss everything about my country. But sometimes when I go back I feel like I’m in between, I don’t know. There are things that I prefer here, there are things that I prefer there... but emotionally I feel closer to where I was born. (Eliza, 108-110)

The participants constructed their new identities by positioning themselves within the American culture. Some of them positioned themselves as international students while others as foreigner or strangers. Ben, a Chinese student, spoke of himself and other international students as foreigners:

Maybe sometimes asking people feels difficult and they won’t like to speak to a foreign student. If you talk to American students or foreign students it feels very easy to do this. (Ben, 163-165)

Ricardo, a student from Venezuela, also identified himself as a foreigner:

When I go to the university they usually know that I am foreigner and they try to speak slow (Ricardo, 48-49)

In this context, for some of the participants building relationships with Americans was more difficult than connecting with their compatriots or other international students. Eliza shared her perceptions of this process:

But here [in the U.S.] people ... have this personal space. They’re nice and they’re polite, but they have this personal

space so you cannot approach them, you cannot build a foundation of a relationship very easily... But in my country with our people it's so easy. (Eliza, 99-102)

Ricardo shared a similar perspective:

I just knew this Colombian guy and two days after that I was making jokes; it was like I knew him for ten years or something like that. And I didn't find one single American guy with whom I feel that way. (Ricardo, 238-240)

In building rapport with Americans several participants experienced anxiety when talking to native English speakers. This experience seems to be connected to their self-confidence in using English and their own perceptions of personal language proficiency. Eliza talked about feeling under the spotlight when speaking to native English speakers:

If I talk to a foreigner I feel much more confident with my language because even if it's wrong that person will understand me... But when I'm talking to an American I feel like I'm saying wrong things and they're going to judge me ... (Eliza, 214-216)

Moreover, some of the participants expressed an ambivalent attitude towards their own language skills. They experienced positive feelings when they had clear ideas to share and a good understanding of the topic. In turn, they had negative feelings when they lacked the vocabulary to share their ideas or when they did not have a clear opinion to express.

The identities of the participants were shaped by the new roles they had to perform. For some of the participants, teaching responsibilities required them to position themselves differently as teachers. This formal role created anxiety about their speaking abilities in the beginning and interfered with their self-concept. One of the participants talked about her teaching experience:

... if I don't feel confident and if students are laughing and make you feel bad about yourself ... maybe they're not laughing at you but you always have those insecurities about your language because of your pronunciation... (Eliza, 201-204)

Thus, teaching as public speaking exposed their insecurity with spoken English. Depending upon its perceived success or fail-

ure, teaching either boosted or decreased their self-confidence as related to their speaking abilities. On the other hand, they perceived their English as more proficient when they were confident about it.

Theme 4 - Joining a new community of practice: *You have to start all over again*

An important part of the effort that these international students invested into their new academic programs was “rebuilding their reputation” and regaining expertise. One of the participants shared:

So there is this feeling that you have to start all over again and build your reputation all over again (Josh, 30-31).

Another participant spoke about the urge to prove herself and demonstrate her competence in the new graduate program: “Sometimes I still feel, when I face my advisor, I still feel a little afraid of, ‘cause I try to be better” (Tanya, 20-21). However this became a challenging process for the international students whose efforts were neutralized by their struggle with oral and written expression in English.

The perceived need of international students to prove themselves was doubled by a perceived loss of the academic expertise that they had acquired in their country of origin. Josh talked about being a very knowledgeable student in his home country and feeling reduced to a novice level in his new academic program:

Back in Brazil I’m really good at writing; I write really fast. But I was working on this exam, and the exam was not difficult; but getting the words organized in a different language, in a topic that’s new - it took me forever to finish the exam. Usually I was the first to leave the classroom when I was working on an exam or anything like that, just write it down and turn it in, but here [American university] I was the last one to leave. (Josh, 50-54).

The participants revealed that difficulties in oral expression demoted them from an expert position in their home country to a novice position in the United States, which caused them deep frustration as voiced by the following participants:

... talking to people you want to show that you’re not that stupid - it’s just language. And that’s why every time you cannot do something that you should, you feel that they will not be-

lieve that I'm smart. (Michael, 139-142)

I had the impression that the people were kinda looking down on me saying "This guy is not as smart as he looked in his application." On my application I was really good. I had several articles published, book chapters ... So I guess my professors ... expected this genius guy ... and they didn't see it 'cause I didn't have the words to show them. So it's kind of frustrating ... (Josh, 265-270)

In addition, the participants felt initially restrained from fully accessing the academic community. They were perceived by instructors and peers as unknowledgeable and non-legitimate contributors of the learning community. English language proficiency and differences in home academic culture were pointed out to be responsible for such. Combined with a feeling of "not living up to their own expectations", this translated into deeper frustrations.

DISCUSSION

By employing phenomenological interviews, this study provided insights into the perceptions of international graduate students regarding their identity as a non-native speaker in an American graduate program. The participants acknowledged the essential role language proficiency played in their academic identity. As they moved between the two linguistic systems – that of their native language and that of English - their identities were reshaped. Specifically, two constructs related to identity were affected: self-esteem and confidence. In this process they seem to experience a loss of personal coherence through feelings of ambivalence towards their English proficiency, anxiety in speaking to native English speakers, and even doubting their cognitive/ intellectual abilities and value as a person.

Michael's statement was especially powerful in expressing the extent to which his identity was affected at the deepest levels. He talked about feeling limited by his English vocabulary to express even simple thoughts, which he described as having a negative effect on his self-esteem. He simultaneously felt restricted and keenly aware that others might perceive him as an "unintelligent" person due to limited English proficiency. In a study of the non-native English speaking students' experiences in group work

across the curriculum Leki (2001) found that American students associated limited English proficiency with intellectual incapacity, consciously or not positioning international/bilingual students as less capable. The international students in this current research felt undermined in their self-esteem due to linguistic limitations. However, they did not explicitly talk about feeling positioned by the American students as less valuable or less capable contributors of the learning community. There was self-awareness of linguistic limitations but not necessarily determined by the negative projections of the American classmates. Some of the findings in this research resonate with the participants' experiences in Heinz's (2001) study. Bilingual/ multilingual participants in this study compared their experience of being limited when using English with walking on a "narrow path" (p.95). However, although Heinz's participants did share a feeling of insecurity when using the second language, they did not talk about such dramatic effects on their self-esteem as the participants in this study did. This difference might be explained by the fresher experience with English of these participants as compared to those in Heinz's study, who had used English for three to 26 years. The participants in this study, in contrast, had been using English for no more than three years.

As these students assumed a variety of roles in the context of their graduate studies (i.e., student, researcher, graduate teaching assistant), each required them to engage in new and different communities of practice. In these roles their confidence in using English was challenged. Teaching responsibilities involving a form of public speaking in front of a student audience had a double impact on the participants' self-confidence. Their self-confidence with English decreased when they perceived a negative response from the audience, while a perceived positive attitude boosted their self-confidence. Similar aspects of the experiences of international students were discussed by Perrucci and Hu (1995). They acknowledged the pressure on international students who taught and were expected to demonstrate high English proficiency from the beginning of their studies. These authors proposed that universities support the advancement of their international students' language skills through programs specifically designed for them.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation is useful for framing the international students' experiences within the academic community. Lave and Wenger defined

learning as participation in a community of practice. The newcomers (novices) engaged in a process of change by interacting with old-timers (experts) within the community of practice. Upon their entrance in the community, the newcomers were not full participants. In order to reach full participation, the newcomers had to move from the periphery of the community towards its center. The findings of this study showed that the international students traversed the circular motion described by Lave and Wenger (1991) as they became members of the new academic community of practice. The process they faced was complex due to the regressive movement they experienced by leaving a community of practice in their country of origin, in which they had been full participants.

The legitimate peripheral participation framework can be used to explain the participants' experience with academics as well as with language. The English speaking world in which the international students lived and studied can be viewed as a community of practice in terms of language. As newcomers, they engaged in this community with native English speakers who could be considered old-timers. Progressively they moved towards full participation which was reached at the point they developed a native-like English proficiency.

At a relational level, the participants contrasted their ability to build relationships with Americans on one hand, and compatriots or other international students on the other hand. Building rapport with U.S. nationals was considered by some of the participants more difficult as they perceived a certain distance being maintained by the U.S. nationals. Although not shared by all the participants, this perception corroborates Lee and Rice's (2007) findings which indicated that some of the international students in their study perceived an individualist attitude and lack of interest for classroom interaction on behalf of their American classmates. However, cultural differences between the American culture and the national one may account for such perceptions. International students coming from a culture which values closer and tighter relationships with other individuals might perceive the members of another culture who do not share the same values as distant and needing privacy in their lives. Independent of the explanation, those students who experienced difficulties in establishing friendships with Americans also talked about grouping together with compatriots or other international students. This is again consistent with Lee and Rice's

(2007) findings.

Moreover, Ricardo, a student from Venezuela talked about international students forming a subculture as they preferred getting together with other international students. This finding is also similar to the Paulus, Bichelmeyer, Malopinsky, Pereira and Rastogi's (2005) case study of group dynamics and power distance in teams comprised of graduate students from different countries. The team of international graduate students "created what it called an American culture for international students where everyone's voice could be heard" (p. 53). The international students felt greater cohesion working with other international students and less cohesion working with American students. Participants in that study reported that Americans "were not patient enough to listen to [their] contribution", "go through materials very quickly, making it difficult to keep up" and "assume leadership and hold decision-making power by default of being American" (p. 52).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore in-depth the experiences of non-native English speaking international graduate students regarding language, culture and academic identity as they joined an academic community and adjusted to the host society. Our participants, regardless of country of origin and native language, shared more similar perceptions than differences regarding language, American culture, and academic identity.

Findings revealed that the participants perceived English as both a barrier and a channel of access. All the participants described their difficulties in expressing feelings, ideas and knowledge; they also described their negative attitudes and challenges to self-esteem, which they related to their foreign language difficulties. The participants acknowledged that it was difficult at the beginning to fully participate in class discussions due to their reduced ability to verbalize thoughts and express pre-existent knowledge in English. Moreover, they were concerned that peers and instructors might perceive them as lacking the knowledge and cognitive abilities to be legitimate contributors in the learning environment and wished there was some way to safely find out the perceptions of native speaking students and instructors.

These findings point to the need for educators who work

with non-native English speaking international students to address not just the academic but also relational and affective issues of these students. This can best be accomplished through use of learner-centered instructional design through which international students can participate in learning communities that provide a safe environment for practicing English, the structure needed to encourage the building of relationships, and where self-assessment is incorporated into coursework and also enhances the instructors' understanding of these students' needs (Blumberg, 2009). In addition, international students' participation in research and graduate teaching assistantships can be enhanced when supervisors create a learning community where relationships are valued and the environment centers on learning for all involved. Instructors and supervisors need to become aware of the challenges that international students may face, and create a class culture that fosters freedom of expression, trust and mutual support. A climate that favors collaboration over competition and respects diversity is more likely to help international students to adjust and contribute to their new academic community. Regarded as a channel of access, the English spoken by international students facilitates a diverse, multi-cultural environment in which all students can benefit. Instructors should capitalize on the international perspective of these students by encouraging the sharing of diverse cultural experiences. Shedding light on how international students make meaning of their experience in the new academic program, this study can inform faculty and campus administrators and can help improve their work with the growing number of international students.

Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, should explore the perceptions of instructors and peers regarding international students' contributions to the learning community. It would also be helpful to examine the instructors' perception of international student participation, challenge and progress in terms of using English for academic purposes. Observations of the role of international students within formal and informal educational settings, especially the resulting group dynamics would provide insight necessary to enhance learning experiences for all participants in settings that include non-native speaking international graduate students.

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