

BUILDING A MORE INCLUSIVE AND WELCOMING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract: This paper explores the challenges of connecting with a cohort when there are significant cultural and linguistic differences. The author, who is an international student, describes how their first birthday in their new country was a lonely experience due to difficulty communicating with their cohort and feeling like an outsider. The paper discusses the factors that can make it difficult to connect with a cohort, such as accent, cultural norms, and expectations. It also offers suggestions for how to overcome these challenges and build meaningful relationships with peers from different backgrounds.

Keywords: Cultural differences, Linguistic differences, International students, Cohorts, Communication

Introduction

My birthdays back in my home country were always huge celebrations and I recently just had my first birthday alone here in my dormitory. It is hard for me to connect with my cohort because they have a hard time understanding my accent, and my cultural perspectives are vastly different from theirs.

—International Student 1

I always feel anxious and nervous when I am around American students, particularly in this major (Public Relations). I feel isolated because of my Asian face. Even when the classroom is almost full, no one seems to want to sit close to me. I don't understand what is wrong with me.

—International Student 2

These are among many similar stories we have heard from international students in our roles as communication professors (both authors) and assistant dean of international affairs (second author). International students face various challenges, including cultural adjustment, language barriers, racism and discrimination, academic challenges, financial challenges, and psychological difficulties (Akanwa, 2015; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Lee & Rice, 2007). As COVID-19 wreaked havoc on college education, these challenges were exacerbated (Hari, Nardon, & Zhang, 2021) and international students were reportedly among the most vulnerable groups of students impacted by the pandemic (Moscaritolo, Perozzi, Schreiber, & Luescher, 2022; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). Now that many universities in the United States are transitioning back to in-person instruction, international students are likely to encounter yet another set of challenges, such as uncertainty in interacting with peers and professors after a long period of distance learning from their home country, increased difficulty in cultural adaptation among first- and second-year students, and issues of pandemic-related racial discrimination.

As communication scholars strive to address the issue of underrepresentation, racial justice, and diversity in our communication discipline, we argue that sufficient attention needs to be placed on supporting international students. This student population brings a diversity of thought to the classroom, enriches class discussions, facilitates globalization of higher education, and is a vital source of revenue for many universities across the United States (Hegarty, 2014; Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Pandit, 2007). With the declining enrollment of international students accelerated by the pandemic (Dennis, 2020), it is more critical than ever before to ensure international students' positive educational experience and well-being to continue attracting and retaining them as well as maintain competitiveness as a preferred study destination (Hegarty, 2014; Tran, 2020). Most importantly, this recovery stage of the pandemic affords us an opportunity to focus on how to move forward and renew our pedagogical practices toward a safer, more equitable, and more inclusive learning environment for students of all backgrounds.

In this reflective article, we view COVID-19 as a transformative agent that can “fundamentally alter the form, structure, and direction” of higher education institutions in teaching, supporting, and meeting the needs of our diverse international students (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005, p. 78). In doing so, we first discuss the ongoing challenges facing international students and how the pandemic has complicated those challenges. Then, we offer new communication research ideas that are pertinent to teaching, learning, and engagement for international students. Lastly, we propose ways faculty, communication departments, universities, and the field can better mentor and support international students in our discipline.

International Students' Ongoing Challenges

Historically, international students have had an enormous number of challenges that may be categorized into five dimensions: language and cultural barriers, racism and discrimination, academic challenges, financial difficulties, and psychological difficulties (Akanwa, 2015; Gautam, Lowery, Mays, & Durant, 2016; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Language and Cultural Barriers

Language proficiency is problematic for many, especially non-English-speaking international students in English-speaking countries (Gautam et al., 2016; Kuo, 2011). An array of linguistic challenges, such as unfamiliar words, slang terms, the fast pace at which the locals speak, mispronunciation, and strong accents, can negatively affect both social lives and academic success (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Kuo, 2011). Cultural challenges are also a major concern. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) identify culture shock as the foremost postdeparture challenge among international students. Their support systems are in a different country and many pop culture references students make in classes don't always apply and are not always understood. Not only are they learning about U.S. culture but also the culture of their academic department and university as well as how to make new friends in their new environments. Therefore, international students often experience feelings of alienation (Gautam et al., 2016) and long for a sense of connectedness and belonging to their institution or host country (Tran & Gomes, 2017).

Racism and Discrimination

Scholars have reported the issues of invisibility, disempowerment, and racism confronting international students in U.S. higher education (Hsieh, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). International students encounter a range of difficulties

from “perceptions of unfairness and inhospitality to cultural intolerance and confrontation” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 381). International students also tend to face ignorance, impatience, and discrimination from their professors and peers (Trice, 2003). For instance, oblivious to international students’ cultural values, instructors may erroneously perceive international students as passive or uninterested in improving. It may be the case that the student comes from a high-power distance culture and feels reluctant to reach out to a professor and ask for help. This relates to the next issue.

Academic Challenges

International students grapple with a different set of academic expectations such as learning/teaching norms, faculty relationships, and curriculum content (Heng, 2016). Due to language barriers and culturally different learning styles, international students may find it hard to comprehend lectures, complete writing assignments, or engage in class discussions (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Kuo, 2011; Mori, 2000). For example, some students prefer written discussions over face-to-face discussions, and some prefer group work over independent work. Additionally, research has shown that higher education institutions tend to have a neocolonialist and/or ethnocentric attitude toward international students, believing they have more to educate international students than they do from learning from them (Ryan, 2011). This biased attitude can affect international students not only as students but as graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). GTAs often receive negative evaluations and struggle to gain acceptance from U.S. students (Manohar & Appiah, 2016) even if the GTAs are experts in their fields of study (Mori, 2000).

Financial Difficulties

Many international students also have to endure financial pressures. The assumption that most international students are wealthy is erroneous (Mori, 2000). Due to immigration regulations, non-U.S. residents are limited to on-campus jobs and are ineligible for federal financial aid (Mori, 2000). This challenge can be heightened as international students have reportedly struggled to get even an on-campus job due to the lack of network, references, information about the job process, or confidence to get the job (Gautam et al., 2016). Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2020) note that many international students were underpaid compared to their noninternational counterparts, considering the higher rate they pay for tuition and other living expenses. Additionally, Thamrin, Pisaniello, Guerin, and Rothmore (2018) posit that international students had fewer work choices, relatively poorer working conditions, and might be at greater risk for occupational injury compared to domestic students.

Psychological Difficulties

Finally, previous research has identified mental health as a prevalent and detrimental issue among international students (Udah & Francis, 2022). Many international students might be among the brightest in their home countries and suffer deep feelings of loss, resentment, and sadness with their difficulties adjusting to the American education system or way of life. This can threaten the students’ self-concept and sense of identity (Mori, 2000). The stress of being separated from their family and friends, high expectations from their families and host country, and the various challenges described above can lead to depression, self-doubt, lowered self-confidence, and anxiety (Forbes-Mewett & Saywer, 2016; Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Impact of COVID-19 on International Students

COVID-19 complicated the challenges international students were already facing prepandemic in so many ways (Hari et al., 2021). A global survey of Student Affairs and Services professionals during the early days of the pandemic revealed that international students experienced emotional stress, inability to return home or return to campus, financial hardships, and fear and uncertainty (Moscaritolo et al., 2022). International students' need to feel connected (Tran & Gomes, 2017) was especially pertinent during the pandemic when students had to rapidly switch to online learning modalities (Sharaievska et al., 2022). Also, many students were not able to work or attend classes in person but still had to pay rent and other fees. This financial hardship and social isolation took a toll on their mental health. Moreover, international students faced challenges in managing time and working across time zones (Godfrey & Yu, 2021a). Further, international students of color experienced explicit racial discrimination, feared threats, and felt unwelcome and unsafe (Koo, Yao, & Gong, 2021). Particularly, Asian international students were targets of discrimination due to the racist rhetoric such as the “China virus” and positioned as both “the Yellow Peril and cash cows” within the context of the pandemic (Yao & Mwangi, 2022, para. 1), leaving them insecure, anxious, and stressed for their physical well-being (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Moreover, Coffey, Cook, Farrugia, Threadgold, and Burke (2021) find that, during the pandemic, female international students faced greater economic and social inequalities, perceived more threats to their physical and mental health, and were more vulnerable to risk and exploitation compared to domestic students.

For the fall 2022 semester, many universities in the United States have returned to in-person instruction. During this period, international students may encounter a new set of challenges. For instance, after a long period of feeling disconnected from campus, students may feel uncertain or anxious about how their social relationships will be with peers and instructors, whether online connections they have made will continue when they return to campus, and whether instructors would continue to be flexible and understanding in terms of delivery modes, class attendance, scheduling, and learning accommodations (Godfrey & Yu, 2021b; Sharaievska et al., 2022). In addition, incoming and second-year students may need extra support for their adaptation process. First-year or transferred students may wonder what a campus climate overseas would be like postpandemic (Godfrey & Yu, 2021b; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). Similarly, many second-year international students started their first year in the fully online learning mode in their home country and may need more guidance adapting to in-person classes as well as adjusting to American culture—the critical process they might have missed during their first year amid the pandemic. Additionally, Han, Chang, and Kearney (2022) posit that it was very hard for international students to adapt to the “new normal” and overcome emotional and cognitive stresses from their home country and their educational country. These learning and cultural differences can impact how international students are able to transition back to in-person classes after remote learning during the pandemic.

In sum, international students face numerous struggles that have been heightened by the pandemic. If not properly addressed, these challenges will likely continue to affect international students' performance (Neuwirth, Jović, & Mukherji, 2021) and make them feel even more alienated from their educational institutions (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). With an understanding of ongoing challenges experienced by international students and how

the pandemic has worsened those challenges, what can communication researchers do to better support international students?

Suggestions for Future Communication Research on Teaching, Learning, and Engagement for International Students

In this section, we propose an interdisciplinary communication research agenda that may address challenges international students have consistently encountered as well as specific challenges connected to the pandemic (see Table 1 for a summary).

Table 1. Proposed Research Agenda.

Research Areas	
Ongoing Challenges	
Intergroup framework	1. How do intergroup stereotypes affect the perceptions of and interaction with international students?
	2. How can we develop transcultural understanding between the host and international students as well as between instructors and students?
	3. How can cultural or identity differences between international and host students as well as instructors be alleviated?
Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging	4. How can we bring underrepresented groups and the various international student groups together and build solidarity among them?
	5. How can we foster the sense of belonging for all groups of students?
	6. What should diversity and inclusion training programs look like? How do
Research Questions	

we evaluate the effectiveness of those training programs?

Pandemic-Related Challenges

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| Political Rhetoric and Media Discourse | 7. How do international students make sense and internalize institutional and media discourses about them during the pandemic? |
| | 8. How can we challenge rhetorical discourses that pit the different marginalized groups against each other? |
| Uncertainty Reduction and Management | 9. Since returning to in-person learning, what uncertainties have international students been facing in interacting with their peers or instructors? |
| | 10. What strategies have international students been using to reduce or manage those uncertainties? |
| Acculturation | 11. How do first- and second-year international students adjust to college after long-distance learning during the pandemic? |
| | 12. What factors contribute to their successful adjustment and acculturation in this unique context? |
| Digital Communication | 13. How can we effectively accommodate students' different learning styles via various computer-mediated platforms? |

14. How can universities use social media to encourage connections and foster better relationships with international students?

Addressing Ongoing Challenges

Intergroup Framework

An intriguing research area is generating transcultural understanding between the host and international students as well as between faculty and students through the intergroup perspective (Hosek & Soliz, 2016). The intergroup perspective can guide research regarding identity differences and how they influence our perceptions and interactions with others (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). Particularly, the intergroup framework can help us understand the issues of hierarchy in teacher-student relationships, class engagement, and ideology in the classroom (Hosek & Soliz, 2016). In this vein, the communication theory of identity can illustrate how students feel marginalized in the classroom based on differences in identity (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008) and intergroup contact theory can further explain how constructive communication positively affects others' attitudes and behavior (Pettigrew, 1998). It is important to position international students not as a threat to domestic students or “‘problems’ to be solved but as ‘assets’ to internationalization and the generation of new knowledge and new ways of working in the academy” (Ryan, 2011, p. 631). Through the intergroup framework, cultural or identity differences between international students and domestic students as well as faculty may be alleviated, facilitating the development of international, intercultural, and global competence in both the host country and international students.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging

To embrace diversity in the classroom, we also need action research that can bring underrepresented groups as well as the various international student groups together and build solidarity among them (Glasford & Calcagno, 2012). Such research should also challenge rhetorical discourses that pit the different marginalized groups against each other (Yi & Todd, 2021). Previous studies found that non-White international students were more vulnerable to exclusion and racist abuse than White international students (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). Bardhan and Zhang (2017) suggest a creative coalition for social justice could possibly occur if those who have been marginalized could empathize with others who are oppressed in similar or other ways. Research into cultural identities and identity negotiation may prove fruitful for increasing this mutual understanding and narrowing the divide between the various minority groups and international student groups (Adegbola, Labador, & Oviedo, 2018; Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003). This line of research may help increase appreciation between various groups and foster students' sense of belonging to their communication major and future profession (Glass, 2018; Goode, Radovic-Fanta, & Bose, 2022). Additionally, Blake, Brown, Follette, Morgan, and Yu (2021) recommend providing implicit bias training as well as diversity and inclusion training to ensure that the best engagement can occur between faculty and students. Chattopadhyay (2022) report that international students felt satisfied when their voices were heard. More research is needed to examine what training programs on these topics should look like and how they can be improved.

Addressing Pandemic-Related Challenges

Political Rhetoric and Media Discourse

Considering the negative impact of governmental rhetoric on international students' perceived discrimination and well-being (Koo et al., 2021; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020; Yao & Mwangi, 2022), as well as their future mobility (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022), we recommend communication scholars explore how current and prospective international students make sense and internalize institutional and media discourses about them during the pandemic. That line of research could identify more positive messages and policies that would help attract, retain, and support the academic success of international students (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022; Yao & Mwangi, 2022).

Uncertainty Reduction and Management

Another suggestion is to look at how international and domestic students reduce or manage uncertainty in interacting with each other and with their instructors as they return to face-to-face learning. Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001) may serve as fruitful theoretical frameworks for identifying a range of uncertainties students and instructors are currently facing and the strategies they are using to reduce or manage those uncertainties.

Acculturation

Moreover, particular attention should be given to supporting first- and second-year international students in their academic and social adaptation to campus life in the United States. Previous research has indicated that on-campus socialization opportunities and strong host networks significantly predict international students' social adjustment (Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014). With COVID-19 safety measures such as social distancing and face masks still in place for in-person operations at least at the beginning of the 2021–2022 academic year, the opportunities for new or second-year international students to participate in leisure activities and socialize with host country members could be limited. In this unique postpandemic context, acculturation theories (e.g., Berry, 2005) may offer helpful insight for understanding how first- and second-year international students adjust to college, thus potentially extending the international student adjustment literature.

Digital Communication

Further, internationalization can be facilitated using technology, which is another avenue for future research exploration. COVID-19 propelled higher education institutions to improve the use of digital tools for maintaining academic continuity and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching (Kedra & Kaltsidis, 2020). The use of digital tools will likely continue postpandemic (Woicolesco, Cassol-Silva, & Morosini, 2022), and researchers have suggested the future of higher education should be hybrid (Benito et al., 2021). With the increasing use of digital tools such as virtual or hybrid classrooms, we need to understand how to effectively accommodate students' different learning styles and communicate with students via various computer-mediated platforms. Online learning tools provide students with flexibility as well as the opportunity to be creative and sharpen their online communication proficiency. At the same time, online learning can limit and restrict students' access to their instructors. Han and colleagues (2022) report international students prefer in-person over mediated interactions because they are more organic and interactive. Also, international students feel that instructors are more accessible in person; it is easier to ask questions before and after class in an in-person classroom than in an

online class. Additionally, researchers can explore how universities can use social media to encourage connections and foster better relationships with international students, which may in turn increase their satisfaction with their universities (Misirlis, Zwaan, Sotiriou, & Weber, 2020).

Mentoring and Supporting International Students Post COVID-19

Aside from conducting more research, faculty, departments, universities, and the communication field as a whole share an important role in supporting and mentoring international students both inside and outside of the classroom. We summarize our recommendations in Table 2.

Table 2. Suggestions for Mentoring and Supporting International Students.

Mentoring and Supporting International Students

1. Be self-reflexive about our assumptions and pedagogical practices.
2. Remain sensitive to the students' cultural backgrounds.
3. Keep enhancing our own multicultural competencies.
4. Create opportunities to connect with and advocate for international students inside and outside of the classroom.
5. Move away from Euro-centric content and incorporate international case studies, materials, or perspectives into the curriculum.
6. Utilize class activities, simulations, or interactive discussions that help all students develop empathy toward the feeling of being a foreigner.
7. Embrace a holistic collaboration between various service offices, departments, and student organizations.
8. Engage international students not only academically and interculturally but also mentally and emotionally.
9. Develop emergency response mechanisms to support the well-being of international students in times of future crises.
10. Foster cultural diversity, equity, inclusion, and access through programming and sessions that help continue the conversation about these issues.

First, we need to be self-reflexive about our assumptions and pedagogical practices and remain sensitive to the students' cultural backgrounds (Bardhan, 2003). We need to keep enhancing our own multicultural competencies and creating opportunities to engage and connect with students outside the classroom (Bardhan, 2003; Hendrix et al., 2003). The second author hosted potluck dinners where each student had to bring a dish from their country. It was delightful to taste something authentic and a great way to get to know the students more personally. Besides, it was eye-opening to realize that some of the ingredients they are so used to getting in their country were hard to obtain here and/or very expensive.

Intentional approaches to bringing domestic and international students together inside the classroom are equally important (Godfrey & Yu, 2021b; Tran, 2020). An example is to purposefully move away from Euro-centric content and incorporate international case studies, materials, or perspectives into the curriculum (Tran, 2020). It

can also be beneficial to utilize class activities, simulations, or interactive discussions that help all students develop empathy toward the feeling of being a foreigner navigating an unfamiliar academic environment and culture whose language is not the student's mother tongue (Tran, 2020). For instance, when teaching the concept of frame of reference, the first author would unexpectedly interject a few sentences in her native language and then engage the students in a conversation about what it feels like to communicate without a shared frame of reference. Also, she uses a simulation that breaks students into two made-up cultures with different cultural values and gets them to interact with one another with the goal of enhancing the students' intercultural competence. Such activities can enrich the classroom experience, develop global awareness, and optimize learning for both domestic and international students as well as teachers themselves (Tran, 2020).

At the institutional level, COVID-19 has presented universities with the need to develop emergency response mechanisms to support the well-being of international students in times of future crises (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). During a high-stress event, international students need clear and timely communication as well as reassurance about housing policies, visa regulations, course modalities, and safety measures, to name a few (Godfrey & Yu, 2021b). Therefore, a holistic collaboration between various service offices, departments, and student organizations is necessary for developing preventive and responsive strategies that appropriately address the academic, financial, immigration, and psychological needs of international students (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). This is particularly critical for international students from marginalized backgrounds who may have limited access to information sources, financial support, or sociocultural support (Godfrey & Yu, 2021b). As Uдах and Francis (2022) highlight, support services for the future should focus on both equity and quality to ensure international students' mental health and educational outcomes.

Furthermore, we need to find more inclusive ways to help students transition to their academic program without having them struggle with adapting to a new environment independently. Especially during a national or global catastrophe, we need to engage international students "not only academically and interculturally, but also mentally and emotionally" (Tran, 2020, p. xiii). Also, we need to have ways to give international students a voice and have their voices be heard. We need to find ways to connect with our international students and recognize them not only as students but also as individuals who have sacrificed so much to be here. Once we help them adapt to the program, it is imperative that we offer opportunities for scholarship and research so that they can grow professionally and help move the discipline forward.

Lately, the political climate of this country has limited the acceptance of cultural and ideological differences. We don't necessarily have to agree with other cultural ideologies, but we can understand and respect our differences. As a learned society in our respective academic associations, we are obligated to foster cultural diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. We need to create programming and sessions that help continue the conversation about these issues. The only way for the discipline of communication studies to get stronger and better is to include all voices so that they are not only heard but appreciated. This requires meaningful and purposeful interactions that invite participatory decision making and allow for transformative change.

Conclusion

We argue that any attempt to promote racial justice in our communication field should include both U.S. and non-U.S. marginalized groups to embrace diversity in our discipline more fully. If we are to do a better job of recruiting and mentoring international students in our programs, professions, and academic pipelines, we need to understand the struggles they have been historically facing and actively seek to empower them. Whereas COVID-19 posed unprecedented challenges to higher education, it also provided a positive opportunity for us to reflect on how we can better support international students. In this article, we describe the challenges this student population has encountered and suggest scholarly and practical ideas for renewing our pedagogical approaches that may benefit students of all backgrounds. Regardless of a global pandemic, no student should have to celebrate her birthday alone just because of her strong accent or sit by himself in the classroom just because his face looks different. We hope the interdisciplinary research agenda, as well as the recommendations presented here, would help us take a step closer to creating a more inclusive internationalization of the communication discipline.

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