

## **“Native Speakers Do Not Understand Me”: A Phenomenological Study of Student Experiences from Developing Asian Countries at an American University**

Wolayat Tabasum Niroo<sup>a\*</sup> and Mitchell R. Williams<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Old Dominion University*

\*Corresponding author: Email: [wtaba001@odu.edu](mailto:wtaba001@odu.edu)

### **ABSTRACT**

*International students from developing Asian countries where English is the second and foreign language are marginalized in some American Universities due to language barriers. Native English speakers often assume that whoever comes to the United States should be able to speak and write English perfectly. In developing Asian countries, such as South Asia, however, the English language belongs to the families of the Middle and Upper classes. They can get admission in English spoken countries' higher education institutions. However, when those students come to English-speaking countries, they feel othered, left alone, and disappointed. This study utilizes a phenomenological research method to tell the students' lived experiences from several Asian countries, including some isolated nations. Specifically, this study focuses on the writing challenges of students and how they utilize the limited resources to help them succeed.*

**Keywords:** international students, developing countries, English language, imperial tongue, language of the middle-class

---

Received 11/8/20; revised 5/29/21; revised 8/15/21; accepted 9/10/21

## INTRODUCTION

English is academia and scholarly research (Altbach, 2007; Yao, Garcia, & Collins, 2019). In some developing countries across the world, school systems teach English in primary schools to equip their citizens with language skills from a young age. However, English has become the language of higher education institutions (Yao, Garcia, & Collins, 2019). According to the World Forum Report, there are more non-native English speakers than native speakers. Similarly, more students are studying English in China than in the United States, and more people speak English in India than in Great Britain (Altbach, 2007). Colonialism instigated the spread of the English language to the Global South and made it the language of prestige, middle-class, and white and wealthy people (Altbach, 2007; Singh, 2017). In the same vein, English-speaking countries have become the land of opportunity for international students since getting an education in English promises better career opportunities (Koustoubos, 2018; Yao, Garcia, & Collins, 2019). As a result, international student enrollment in higher education institutions in the United States has been significant (Gurel-Cennetkusu, 2017; Hu, 2014; Okusolubo, 2018).

This study explores international students' academic challenges in developing Asian countries face in U.S. higher education institutions (HEI). Specifically, the current study examines the difficulties in writing assignments and understanding academic expectations in central and southeast Asian nations as previous research has done in east Asia and China. There is extensive research about Asian (primarily Chinese) students' overall academic challenges in English language schools (Baker, Child, et al., 2007; Berno & Ward, 2003; Campbell & Li, 2008; Carson, 1992; Durkin, 2004; Huang, 2007; Hu, 2014; Lo, 2010; Phakiti & Li, 2011). However, few studies have been conducted concerning the academic writing challenges of students from developing Asian countries found in Central and Southeast Asia. Also, within the current literature, there is a lack of contextual (Kaplan, 1966; Lo, 2010; Wang, 2005) exploration of the students from the mentioned regions. Hence, research is necessary to understand the gap and the way forward for the U.S. HEIs (Campbell & Li, 2008; Hu, 2014). Therefore, this study will address the question: How do students from developing

Asian countries understand and experience academic writing at University A, a large, urban research-focused university?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Some Asian students come to the States with little knowledge of English as well as little awareness of the educational system and academic demands. They come with knowledge about their country's institutions (Phakiti & Li, 2011; Wang, 2005). Even though students who gain admission to the United States HEIs show good skills in the English language, comprehending academic writing becomes a challenge (Campbell & Li, 2008; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Wang, 2005). The Test of English as a Foreign Language or TOEFL measures "the ability of nonnative speakers of English to use and understand English as it is spoken, written, and heard in college and university settings" (ETS, 2007, para.1). Students' academic success depends mainly on performing well on various academic writing tasks at most universities. Most graduate-level courses require papers and other forms of academic writing as evidence of students' understanding and mastery of course materials. Universities that rely on TOEFL scores to make admissions decisions are expected to benefit if students' writing performance on the TOEFL is comparable to how they would perform in writing tasks in university settings.

Llosa and Malone (2018) focused their research on undergraduate students in their first year of postsecondary work, and the researchers analyzed both first and final drafts of course assignments. In this way, the researchers could isolate students' writing ability from post-instruction performance. Llosa and Malone (2018) found that a version in the TOEFL Writing section was somewhat associated with all dimensions of writing quality in academic writing tasks in a required writing course. At the same time, their findings indicated that the TOEFL Writing section was most strongly associated with "grammatical and cohesive control in their writing and with the writing they can do in first drafts" (p. 254). Hence, it is demonstrated that standardized tests such as the TOEFL and GRE may not help in predicting academic success (Phakiti & Li, 2011; Wang, 2005).

According to the Institute of International Education (2015) published data, the United States hosts more than 4 million international students each year. Thus, some American campuses are internationalized, eager to bring students from different parts of the world for diversity and financial reasons (Gurel-Cennetkusu, 2017). This phenomenon caused educators to create writing centers

as a source of support for all students, especially international students. It is observed that even students with a previous degree in English from their home countries struggle academically in the U.S. HEIs (Kaplan, 1966; Phakiti & Li, 2011). Research demonstrates that international students lack an understanding of academic expectations in their fields of study rather than speaking and understanding English (Braxley, 2005; Gurel-Cennetkusu, 2017).

International students who have difficulty with academic writing may look to various sources for assistance, including a campus-based writing center, academic tutors, faculty members/mentors, and online sources. Although seeking help is understandable and even expected, the type and level of appropriate or ethical help are not always clear, (Kim & LaBianca, 2018). These authors examined the perceptions of faculty and international students of what is ethical in providing academic writing help for international students. Their findings indicated that students often lacked certainty on whether a specific service they may receive is ethical. The perceptions of students from East Asia often showed notable differences from other international students.

However, language barriers exist to a vast degree. According to Zhang (2016) and Sato and Hodge (2009), language barriers impact students' confidence and social lives. Chai et al. (2020) elaborate that integrating social and academic life is critical for international students in their host countries' institutions. Wang et al. (2017) found that 46 percent of East Asian students avoided interaction with American students due to their perceived American bias (p. 11). Similarly, 41 percent of East Asian students said they avoided American students because they looked down on them or stereotyped them (p. 10). Along the same line, their study showed that 23 out of 28 (82 percent) American students preferred to interact with East Asian students with a better English accent. Vandrick (2014) found that status effects are not abstract but strongly affect lived experiences. He explains that other students or even instructors may look down on ESL students or underestimate their intelligence and knowledge in the classroom because they do not speak English well or do not understand the dominant culture well (Vandrick, 2014, p. 89). Also, native English speakers often assume that whoever comes to the United States should be able to speak perfect English. Finally, there seems to be an assumption among many Americans that everyone in the world can and should speak English.

Zhang (2016) argues that among international students, Asian students are the ones who face the most severe academic challenges in U.S. HEIs. Among Asian students, however, those from Central Asia or countries that are

underdeveloped or isolated may experience even more significant problems. In such countries, English is the language of “the Middle-Class” and the language of the “rich and powerful” (Koo, 2016, p. 5; Singh, 2017, p. 1). Writing according to academic standards is a challenge for all students, regardless of nationality and international students face additional difficulties when expected to produce academic essays or theses (Braine, 2002; Braxley, 2005; Gurel-Cennetkusu, 2012 & 2017). Graduate-level academic writing, with its structure, clarity, the flow of language, and use of literature, is a massive challenge for students with English as a second or a foreign language (Gurel-Cennetkusu, 2017, 2010, 2011; Li, 2007). In Gurel-Cennetkusu's (2017) survey of international students' academic challenges with writing their theses, almost 88% of the participants did not have any academic writing courses in their degree programs (p. 312). At United States HEIs, international students are put into classes without preparatory academic courses (Hu, 2014; Phakiti & Li, 2011).

## **METHODS**

This study is based on a phenomenological tradition where an in-depth description of the “lived experiences” is brought into a broader discussion (Van Manen, 1990, p. 25). As Wynne (1997) explains, a phenomenological study is about pure description and interpretation of an experience; it aims to dig into a phenomenon and discover the “meaning and essence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27) of lived experiences of the participants. Moustakas (1994) indicated that “phenomenology refers to knowledge” and knowledge “rests on inner evidence” (p. 26). To discover the wisdom and extend it, one must go deep into the phenomenon. This is where Geertz's (1973, p. 10) “thick description” comes into play. As he indicates, a more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon will increase the dialogue and interpretation in experiencing a particular aspect of the culture (Geertz, 1973). As Vagle (2018) states, every phenomenon has different essences. Further, Dalhberg (2009) indicates that essences are found in everyday life, and world experiences; essences are not something unexplainable or mystical.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study utilizes a phenomenological design within a social constructivist paradigm. This paradigm explores the environment that plays a role in lived experiences. With social constructivism, there are multiple realities, not just one, as well as a focus on the “how” and the “what” revealed by the information disclosed in the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Epistemology refers to how the research process constructs knowledge – how we know what we know (Hays & Singh, 2012). In the case of social constructivism, knowledge is built between the participant and the researcher (Hays & Singh, 2012). Collecting individuals' experiences, the researcher did not intend to theorize but rather to “discover and describe the meaning or essence of the participants' lived experience, or knowledge as it appears to ‘consciousness’ (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 50). To that end, phenomenology helped to explore individuals' experiences.

### **Context**

University A, where this study was conducted, has over 24,000 students, including 4800 graduate students. The University offers 41 master's degrees and 22 doctoral degrees in Engineering, Health Sciences, Education, Business, and Arts and Letters. According to the most recent data, 769 international students from 89 countries enrolled at the university. To retain the anonymity of the participants and the university they attended, I refer to University A., a large, urban, research-focused university in the southeastern United States. Individual and focus group interviews took place at the university's student center. All of the observations took place in the participant's off-campus room while she was working on a writing assignment. One observation addressed the time before she began writing and while she was reflecting on the project. All three comments took place in the same setting and covered various phases of the participant's writing process.

### **Participants**

Seven participants took part in this study, all of whom were international graduate students from several different Asian countries at University A. These students participated in the study in one of three ways: four participated in individual interviews; one participant was observed on three occasions, and four participants were in a focus group. To keep the anonymity, I used digital codes, such as #1, #2, and #3 (as indicated in Table 1), for each participant and did not indicate their home country or the name of the university they obtained their previous degree. They were at different stages of their graduate degree. Each from 30-60 minutes in length; three 20-minute participant observations with one individual and a 1.30-minutes focus group interview. The number of individuals in this study is suitable for phenomenological research design. As Vagle (2018) devices, it is acceptable to research with one individual to get a sense of their lived experiences or lifeworld.

**Table 1: Participant Characteristics**

| Participants   | Gender | Year | Academic Program        | Home Region    |
|----------------|--------|------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Participant #1 | Female | 1    | International Education | Central Asia   |
| Participant #2 | Female | 1    | Educational Leadership  | Central Asia   |
| Participant #3 | Female | 2    | Educational Leadership  | Southeast Asia |
| Participant #4 | Female | 1    | Oceanography            | Southeast Asia |
| Participant #5 | Male   | 2    | International Relations | South Asia     |
| Participant #6 | Male   | 5    | International Relations | Southeast Asia |
| Participant #7 | Male   | 5    | Technology Education    | Central Asia   |

The selection of participants for this study resulted from a snowball sampling process which included assistance from the Center for Global Engagement at the university. The initial contact with the participants had a general description and the purpose of my study. If the individual expressed interest, they were provided with more information about the various data collection options. If the individual continued to express a willingness to participate, they were given consent forms well before the data collection. All participants were provided a hard copy of the consent form to explain the nature of the study, potential risks and benefits, their rights as participants, their ability to withdraw from the study at any time, and a request for permission to be digitally recorded. Before each interview, the participants were encouraged to ask questions. IRB approval was obtained to conduct the discussions, and the individuals did not receive any compensation for their time and sharing their experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Individual interviews were the first method of data collection for this phenomenological study. Interviews offered articulated stories, thoughts, and feelings about the lived experiences or “lifeworld” (Vagle, 2018, p. 77). Semi-structured interviews utilized a prepared interview protocol to serve as a guide for the interview; however, once the interview was underway, the interviewee had more influence over the flow of the conversation (Hays & Singh, 2012; Kvale, 2008). According to Barriball and While (1993), semi-structured interviews “are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of participants regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (p. 330). For a phenomenological study, observation is one of the critical data collection methods, as the researcher aims to connect herself to the meaning of the phenomenon she studies (Vagle, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). During the observations, data were obtained by observing participants experiencing the phenomenon. Detailed notes about how a student went through writing an assignment, for example how she wrote essays/papers, where she gets support, etcetera were taken.

### **Data Analysis**

I used thematic coding because this approach deals with exploring the participants’ meaning of lifeworld and emotional experiences (Saldana, 2013). Following the initial step of creating summary memos, I continued to organize the text, coded, and identified themes and patterns. I first used the word frequency on NVivo 12 Plus software. Looking at the repeated words, I identified articles related to students’ experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). After completing the coding, I checked the code stripes, and there were a few unnecessary codes that I encoded. After

obtaining much information (Hays & Singh, 2012; Vagle, 2018), a few primary and sub-teams were identified (see Table 2).

### **Reflexivity**

Hays and Singh (2012) and Moustakas (1994) stated that removing all researchers' biases in a qualitative study is impossible. I approached this research with a rich understanding of my biases in this field (Wynne, 1997). To set aside my biases, I used bracketing and horizontalization methods. Bracketing in phenomenological study design alleviates the researchers' influence and prejudices that may influence the research process (Hay & Singh, 2012; Tufford & Newman, 2012). This process eliminated any section not directly related to the research questions or the participants' experiences. As Eddles-Hirsch (2015) explains, through this process, I made sure that my data were my "participants' descriptions rather than my perceptions" (p. 255-256).

### **Credibility**

Since I had walked the same path when I came to the United States for my undergraduate degree, it was hard to realize my position as a researcher. However, I bracketed my biases and used reduction or elimination processes to gather and present biased-free data and analysis. Furthermore, after each data collection phase, I kept journaling to separate my probable biased feelings from what I observed. I heard about others' experiences and was fascinated by them.

## **FINDINGS**

Through a systematic process of analysis of the data from the interviews, focus groups, and observations, four main themes were identified: (1) the background in English; (2) English in the United States; (3) the writing process; and (4) support from the school. Each of these central themes contained different sub-themes, which are discussed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Identified Main Themes and Sub-Themes**

| Number | Main Themes                  | Sub-Themes  |
|--------|------------------------------|---|
| 1      | Background about English     | English as a Language of the "Middle Class  |
| 2      | English in the United States | "I Cannot Understand What My Professors Say."<br><br>"Teachers Do not Explain Their Expectations."          |
| 3      | Writing Process              | "I do not know where to start from."<br><br>Connecting the Dots<br><br>"I Did Not Know What Plagiarism Was" |
| 4      | Support From the University  | Domestic Peers  |



## Background About English

The participants were in different phases of their education at University A and from diverse backgrounds. Participant #2, for instance, had a bachelor's degree in Commercial Law in English from her home country. She thought she was mentally, emotionally, and even academically prepared for a different environment; however, she still faced challenges. For her, it was difficult to understand the U.S. grading system:

For example, we have the highest 10 points [in her school]. I assumed eight out of 10 was a good mark here. But eventually, I realized that it was not so, and at this point, I was a little bit confused at the beginning, and I didn't know what my level was.

Participant #3, on the other hand, did not have a degree in English before coming to the U.S. She said that those who work with English-speaking companies or NGOs knew English well in her hometown. In her country, English was taught as a language in school but not in a way one would become fluent, just basic grammar and conversation. She learned to speak English from the community: "I learned English by engaging in organizations and club meetings. I tried to engage a lot, so I can use my Inglis [English] as a spoken and I tried to be active in class regardless." She had not studied English previously, and her exposure to academic English was limited:

In my undergraduate and high school, English was not the language of instruction. And we learn English only about grammar and structure. They don't emphasize writing and conversation. I know English outside of school, in British Counsel [in her country]

Participant #4, however, got her master's degree in Australia and then came for her Ph.D. in the U.S. She said she was exposed to the English language from childhood at home and school.

English is considered our second language, but we all learn English as early as nursery or kindergarten. So, people starting from K 12 would always have English in their curriculum and textbooks other than the [native language]. All the books and instructions and exams are all in English.

Coming to the U.S. and enrolling in an American university has not presented her with specific challenges because she learned English as early as high school.

Participant #5 was from one of the developing countries in South Asia. He considered English a second language in his country, and he studied finance as an undergraduate and received an MBA at a public university. He attended a public university where courses were taught entirely in English, particularly those with the highest status. Three of the study's participants, numbers 1, 6, and 7, also had extensive backgrounds in the use of English within an academic environment.

## English as a Language of the "Middle Class"

Listening to the participants, I realized that exposure to the English language depends on socioeconomic background. Although Participant #4 indicated that one single curriculum is practiced in all schools nationwide in her country, socioeconomic background played an important role. Participant #5 took immense pride in coming from a middle-class family exposed to the outside world compared to his fellow citizens. In some South Asian countries, English is the "middle-class" family; hence, only middle-class families can afford to send their children to English language schools and get tutors from a young age. He was bragging about his hard work, traveling to more than ten essential countries, and going to a good school back home. He stated, "I

have traveled to other critical [developed and English speaking] countries, and I did training once in Australia for three months. Another one was in the Netherlands for 40 days, and both were conducted in English.”

Participant #6 showcased that he worked with non-governmental organizations and got his Master’s in the Netherlands. Hence, those who could afford it were exposed to a more intense or academic English language. As a result, I thought Participant #4 spoke English better than a native English speaker. Participant #3 was the only one who was not exposed to academic English and did not have the opportunity to travel for training to English-speaking countries, presumably due to financial issues.

### **English in the United States**

The writing assignments were challenging for most participants during the first academic semester. One described the semester as a “shock,” but Participant 3 used the word “nightmare: “In my first semester, I just want [wanted] to cry for the first few months because I thought that there are [were] a lot of papers and I cannot [could not] combine the resources into papers.” She feared academic failure in the first semester. With a new language and an entirely different educational system, she doubted her ability and proficiency in the English language.

#### **“I Cannot Understand What My Professors Say.”**

Participant #2, despite studying English in her home country, had difficulties understanding her professors in class, and she said she still has trouble. She indicated there was one course in particular in which she struggled to understand what the professor was saying; she blamed “the language issue.” However, she seemed satisfied with her English proficiency in understanding the content of the course. Having said this, she admitted that sometimes she did not understand some of her professors. She specifically mentioned new idioms as a challenge, but she felt it was not an issue in her understanding of course content. Participant #3, at times, did not understand her professors’ language in class and at other times during office hours.

Sometimes I cannot understand what the professor says in class. So, I usually ask my friends to make sure that it's those kinds of things that the professor wants from us ... somehow, I cannot keep up with the speed of the professors speaking in class. She also said I am more comfortable asking a classmate sitting next to me rather than asking my professor to repeat.

#### **“Teachers Do not Explain Their Expectations.”**

Understanding what the instructors expect from students was another challenge for some students. For participant #2, however, it was hard to understand the assessment components and what teachers looked for:

They [home institution] would concentrate more only on the quality of our analysis, quality of ideas. But here, I don't know if it's the requirement of American universities; they pay attention to everything, including the references and the formatting of the whole paper.

Participant #1, for example, had written her assignment a month ago. However, after comparing her essay with her classmate, she realized that she had not done what the professor had expected. In other words, she did not understand the syllabus. I asked her why she did not go to the professor before beginning the essay to ensure she understood the concept and structure. She said she had thought she understood the professor’s expectations and that she had completed the assignment correctly. Like cultural shock, the academic shock could be nerve-racking for students

from a very different school system, even if they studied English in their home institutions. In addition, understanding the writing structure in specific fields was a common challenge the participants experienced. Participant #4 described the level of intensity in her first semester as “as difficult as hell:”

The only thing that I had to improve was how to structure the stuff better...I find that difficult because I'm in the field of marine sciences; you have to have a different way of making technical reports as opposed to like, for example if you're writing for a publication, it's different from when you're doing something for an article in the news. And in the first semester, it can be as challenging as hell!

## Writing Process

**“I do not know where to start from.”** Each individual who participated in the study had unique challenges with academic writing. In one of the observations, participant #1 had chosen cross-border education in the national policy of internationalization of higher education policy in the United States. She searched online databases but could not find anything useful. She did a Google search and found a few non-academic pieces that had discussed the challenges of the policy, but she could not find anything about the impact and benefits of cross-border education; the assignment required this information. She searched for the phrase “benefits of cross-border education,” and nothing she needed appeared. I suggested that she might need to narrow down the search terms and add a few words about the U.S. national policy on internationalization. She then found some specific points that UNESCO, OECD, and the World Bank had written. From there, she heavily relied on Google search. She began to use those pieces from the mentioned sources.

Participant #1 had issues using the right words or terms to connect her ideas. For example, she had written and looked for a synonym for the word “interest” in her sentence: “...for the students’ interest.” She thought this was an economic term, and thus she had to find another word used in education. Then she looked for the synonym for “opportunity” and utilized “perspective,” which was not the right word. In some cases, she forgot to use the pronoun instead of the phrase “cross-border education” at the beginning of each sentence. She kept writing the essay.

I observed that writing in English is not difficult for participant #1. She paid particular attention to her writing style and grammar, but she was not familiar with academic writing in English. For instance, when she wrote from her point of view, without any obligation to provide citations and references, she wrote well; however, she did not know how to incorporate them into her writing when she found references. When she borrowed an author’s words, she used the exact words without citing or quoting. For Participant #3, significant issues were grammar, clarity, and sentence structure. She was prone to making grammatical errors as well as errors in the flow of her sentences and coherence:

For the grammar, I [get] help a lot from the Grammarly, and I also just [follow my] feeling in my sense. Usually, it is wrong if I do not make sense of those words. Somehow, if you learn English a lot, you can get the importance of the grammar, whether it is inaccurate.

## Connecting the Dots

Participant #3 said her most significant obstacle in writing an academic essay was connecting ideas she generated from theoretical readings: “I have lots of resources. Connecting those ideas from all books and journals in flowing and natural academic writing is a challenge.”

Connecting the authors' points and weaving them into their writing was also a challenge for participant #1. Like many graduate students, she did not know how to connect multiple ideas from a journal article into a coherent paper. She did not learn how to connect all those ideas in the essay.

Because I was sitting next to her, she asked me how to use the points mentioned in the article: "Shall I Write the Whole Sentence and Quote or Write Down What They Have Written and Cite?" I advised her not to do either. I told her to paraphrase and cite instead. She did not know how to paraphrase. I went closer to her computer screen to read the points she referenced. As an example, I selected a point for her and asked her to write it in her own words. What is written here is my idea; in what other way could I write that? She said, I told her not to look at the sentence the author had framed; instead, I would grasp the idea and write how she would own words and then cite it in her language. She wrote a couple of paragraphs, paraphrasing from one source or author. She was stuck with one head and elaborating on one idea about the impact, and she moved to the next point, benefit, and moved to another source. She continued writing; I realized she was jumping from one theme to another without proper explanation or developing her points.

All of the students had some level of struggle with the English language. Participant #3 sounded as though she struggled to read and then write an essay for any of her classes. She said it took a long time to write an essay because she had to read it first, which was a challenge. Indeed, academic reading is difficult for everyone; even native speakers need time to understand the concept. However, Participant #3 said that she had to read line by line instead of skimming or looking at the main points of different sources, which was a challenge, then write. In addition, for Participant #4, Participant #5, and Participant #3 integrating literature into their writing was and is one of the most challenging tasks:

When you integrate literature into your writing, you're trying to understand the concept. And that's what I've been struggling to do. Reading through much information, comprehend that, and then transfer that into a paper.

### **"I Did Not Know What Plagiarism Was"**

Participant #5 did not know about plagiarism in academia. Even though he had studied English previously, the structure of academic writing was different for him at University A. He said that copying and borrowing ideas from other sources did not mean plagiarism in his country. His professors asked him to bring his attention to plagiarism. It was challenging to paraphrase initially, but he admitted that it was good practice. "...it has helped me improve my writing without doing any copy and paste."

Plagiarism came up in my participant observation as well. For instance, during one of the observations, my participant had one paragraph of citation, which was the author's exact words. She left it without specifying, explaining, or connecting it to her writing. There was also a quotation copy-pasted from an unexplained source. Apart from those two sources, everything was written from her point of view, borrowing ideas from Google search. For her, it did not make sense to paraphrase others' ideas and cite them. She said what was written here [in the article] was my idea. In what other ways could I write that? These students came to the United States with knowledge about their academic disciplines but not about U.S. academic culture and mores (Phakiti & Li, 2011; Wang, 2005).

### **Domestic Peers**

For Participant #3, group work or projects have been challenging because her group members were native speakers, and it was difficult for her to work at their speed. She indicated that her student cohort could complete assignments faster than she was able due to language issues. She

was stressed that she could not contribute as quickly during group assignments. She continued with a lower voice:

I am disappointed in the groups with the domestic students because I asked them to meet even through calling or something, but they did not want it, and they rushed one day before. So, I found it challenging to keep up my writing and speak with them because English is their native language. They do not encounter difficulties with it.

Participant #3's pain was very evident and difficult to hear. On the one hand, I wondered how she survived the past three semesters; but on the other hand, I saluted her patience and commitment and strived for an education.

Participant #4, who seemed to be more connected with domestic students in her field, said she sought help from them. She indicated that when she began to accept help from her American friends, her reading habits and ability to summarize improved. Her friends also gave her study tips and advice, which was very helpful. Participant #3, on the other hand, would rely on readings as she does not have one or two readings but so many:

So yeah, I have to work hard, read more, and then make a draft. And then I did [do] think more, and more so it looks more flow and natural...there are differences between Asian and American cultures. Asians work collectively, and Americans like to be independent, and if you disturb them, they don't like it. That doesn't mean they are not good, but this is how their culture is.

The frustration of Participant #3 was evident when she said that not only was her academic writing a challenge, but her spoken English was also unclear to native English speakers. She could quickly form ideas and thoughts in her mind, but she was often misunderstood when she verbally expressed her opinions and perspectives.

### **Support from the University**

None of the students I talked with sought help to overcome their challenges by seeking help from the university resources. Participant #3 did not want to approach her domestic peers for support and did not find the writing center helped. She was not comfortable going to department or program leaders, faculty members, or her American friends. She added that her American friends and classmates did not offer to help her and never seemed to have time for her.

Each participant mentioned different obstacles with the writing center tutors. Participant #4 and Participant #6 did not need to go there, as they thought they were doing fine. For Participant #3, the writing center could not help her with grammar. Yet, Participant #3 said she had difficulties making her writing understood by native speakers. Her essays' sentence flow and structure made it difficult for readers to understand. She suggested that her challenge is synthesizing different ideas into a coherent paragraph. She struggled to create a natural flow within her academic papers. Her frustration was again evident when she recalled native speakers asking her, "What do you mean by this?" Participant #5 said:

I am from an international relations background here at [University A]. They are not from the exact location when they send someone [tutor]. They try to help us, but they may not help us in the right direction because they are not from the same background.

Likewise, when Participant #1 went to the writing center, she was told about the writing problems found in her essay, but there was no instruction on how to fix the issues.

## DISCUSSION

All the participants had different writing challenges—from grammar to structure, integrating literature, reading, understanding instructors, and not being understood. No matter their school, socioeconomic background, and exposure to English, they had difficulties in their ways. As reported by the World Economic Forum, there are more non-native English speakers than native English speakers (World Economic Forum, n.d.). To that end, speaking English in each country varies with accents, grammar, and pronunciation. Participant #4, whose English was like that of a native speaker exposed to academic English from a young age, had challenges structuring and summarizing academic writing. Participant #5, with a BBA and an MBA in English and who had traveled to almost twenty countries for English training purposes, had no idea what plagiarism was (Abbasi & Graves, 2008). Participant #2, with a degree in Law in English, had a hard time understanding her professor and the system in America.

Similarly, participants #1 and #7 with a degree in English and teaching English for many years at the university level in their hometown, had no idea what an academic paper looked like; Participant #3, who was less exposed to English initially, had a higher level of challenges – e.g., grammar, clarity, sentence flow, connecting ideas, and so forth. However, the biggest challenge for all of them were integrating literature into their writing. Thus, the findings supported (Kaplan, 1966; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Wang, 2005) that acquiring English language skills and passing standardized tests do not guarantee academic success and understanding of the system.

“I came from a middle-class family, so I was repeatedly exposed to the English language”, said participant #5. In developing Asian countries, only those who can afford it can learn English and go to English-medium schools. Families must put effort into helping their children learn English and go to English medium schools within and outside of their country of origin. In South Asia, English medium schools are for the families of the “rich and powerful,” in Singh’s (2017) words. Those families are categorized as the middle-class (Koo, 2016), which grants status and prestige. However, they are marginalized due to differences in English and the academic system.

“Native speakers don’t understand me”, said Participant #3, or native speakers did not make an effort to listen to her. Research indicates that one of the barriers between the domestic and international students interacting socially is English because it affects their ability to communicate, comprehend, and interact on academic and social levels (Geary, 2016; Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014). In line with some of the literature reviewed in this paper, domestic students often do not make an effort to listen to someone who does not speak English at their level. Consequently, participant #3 did not feel comfortable asking for help from her team members because she felt they rejected her. She said she was “disappointed” in her domestic peers.

“Professors outline in the syllabus, but they do not tell their expectations”, said participant #2. This is in line with the arguments presented by Braxley (2005) and Gurel-Cennetkusu (2017) regarding the lack of understanding of academic expectations among international students generally and students from Asian countries in particular. For example, it is essential to remember that higher education institutions do not utilize a syllabus in many countries. For students from isolated countries, the concept of a syllabus may be confusing rather than helpful. The participant’s statement about professors not spelling out certain things in the syllabus also

involves cultural factors. For example, it is essential to remember that higher education institutions do not utilize a syllabus in many countries. In a nation that values individualism and personal liberty, like the United States, communication and learning through online courses on a computer are shared. International students in the United States who are not native English speakers might have more difficulty understanding the professor's requirements in online or computer-dependent courses.

Also, in some Asian countries' teaching methods, integrating literature into academic writing does not make sense. The best academic paper would be the writer's analysis. From participant #1's point of view, citing or paraphrasing did not mean much. According to Abasi and Graves' (2008), students who are less familiar with the genre of academic writing are prone to unintentional plagiarism. Students from different school systems may not know what plagiarism is because they have never practiced it in their home institutions. Hence, as Zhang (2018) said, "cultural background influences" one's writing mode (p. 1). Zhang (2018) states that the view of plagiarism, structure, and source material in the Asian context is different than in the Western countries; these differences are reflected when Asian students write academic papers in English.

Participants #2 and #3 reflected on the speed of professors' language. For students for whom English is a foreign language, professors' and instructors' rate of spoken English is a challenge, mainly if idioms or vernacular phrases are used. For instance, in some Asian cultures, students do not address questions to instructors. In other words, teaching is based on the lecture. In some cases, listening to or understanding the professor is not a must (Geary, 2016; Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014). A lecturer in the U.S. may think that students learn because they do not ask questions, yet this misunderstanding between the instructor and students creates a significant challenge.

"Teachers return my paper and give me two or three days to do it again if it is not good", said Participant #3. However, the question is, what if she does not understand the structure or the way of writing for the second time? Therefore, instructors need to understand and make educational experiences achievable. Students' success is based not only on submitting good assignments but also on engagement and a clear communication channel between teacher and students (Tran, 2020). In Tran's (2020) words, engagement between teacher and students should be "meaningful" and "productive" to understand international students' learning needs and expectations.

"Tutors at the writing center cannot help us in the right way", said Participant #5. Participants sought help from different resources to tackle their writing challenges; however, none went to the writing center where they were supposed to. The findings also supported Zhang's (2016) lack of support at the university writing centers. Participant #5, for example, was satisfied with his instructor's supervision and guidance about plagiarism and how to overcome this challenge. For Participant #4, her domestic peers were a source of support. She went to them to get help maneuvering structures required in her field, although she still struggled with integrating literature. Participant #6 went to his department when he had a question about academics, particularly writing. He said that you have the professors to talk to once you have difficulty, and the department supports sending students to conferences. Participant #3 relied on her reading resources and Grammarly, and participant #1 remained helpless in submitting "however it is," in her words.

This circumstance requires that there should be a more in-depth support system such as short-term training about academic demands, expectations, rules, and regulations. The problem is not the English language but rather understanding the system, educational requirements, academic writing structure, and the teachers' explanation in the syllabus. Therefore, having a tutor at the

writing center who is a native English speaker seems inadequate without any experience with international students. As Participant #1 said, the tutors do not know international students' needs, demands, and problems. Instead, she preferred to talk to another international student who understood the issues. In brief, the writing center existed for students at this particular university; however, it was not helpful for any of the participants. Thus, this service was not a source of help but a waste (Di Maria, 2020).

For the universities that claim diversity in their student bodies, it is vital to have a sound support system for international students, especially students from very different educational backgrounds. Similar to Di Maria's (2020) argument, international students services should continue to refine regularly to be effective. American colleges and universities are helping international students adjust through programs such as orientations, international students' offices, and organizations (Geary, 2016); however, there are gaps to fill. The language barrier could make it difficult for international students to gain and generate knowledge. As Gresham et al. (2012) indicate, the college's responsibility is to create a space for intercultural engagement so students from different cultures do not feel left out or disappointed. Obeidat (2017) says that colleges and universities' environments should be free of biases and discrimination, so international students feel encouraged.

## **Limitations**

A few limitations existed when conducting the study. First, I had a limited number of participants and observations. Given the phenomenological design, however, my goal was to learn the lived experiences of these international students by observing and hearing from them thoroughly. My study would have been more vibrant if I could capture their feelings when they went through those extreme challenges rather than hearing about them. The findings would have been enriched if I could follow some participants writing their papers and seeking help from their professors, classmates, and any software.

## **Future Directions**

Research indicates that international students' challenges in American universities and colleges are not limited to writing. The psychological effect of being cast out, interacting with domestic students and professors, identity struggles, cultural shock, socialization on campus, etc., could be studied separately. Future studies could focus on international students' experiences in the classroom to explore how they interact with professors and domestic peers.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, I described the meaning of a few international students' experiences. In their "lived experiences," I explained or interpreted the explicit purpose of what they go through while writing their assignments in a language other than their own. This study elaborated that no matter the individual's exposure to the English language, they experienced feelings of alienation while reading, listening to class lectures, working with classmates, writing essays, and approaching for help.

## **REFERENCES**



- Abasi, A. R. & Graves, B. (2008). Academic literacy and plagiarism: Conversations with international graduate students and disciplinary professors. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7(4), 221–233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2008.10.010>
- Altbach, P. G. (2007). The imperial tongue: English is the dominating academic language. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(36), 3608–3611. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40276356>
- Barriball, K. L., & While, A. (1993). Collecting data using a semi-structured interview: A discussion paper. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19(2), 328–335. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.1994.tb01088.x>
- Barker, M., Child, C., Gallois, C., Jones, E., & Callan, V. J. (1991). Difficulties of overseas students in social and academic situations. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 43(2), 79–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049539108259104>
- Berno T, & Ward, C. (2003). Cross-cultural and educational adaptation of Asian students in New Zealand. Asia 2000 Foundation of New Zealand, 1-21. <https://auckland.rl.talis.com/items/F4353363-9EC2-716D-2419-7BC50C464AE4.html>
- Braine, G. (2002). Academic literacy and the nonnative speaker graduate student. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 1(1), 59-68. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1475-1585\(02\)00006-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1475-1585(02)00006-1)
- Braxley, K. (2005). Mastering academic English: International graduate students' "use of dialogue and speech genres to meet the writing demands of graduate school." In K. H. Hall, G. Vitanova, & L. Marchenkova (Eds.), *Dialogue with Bakhtin on second and foreign language learning* (pp. 11–32). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Carson, J. G. (1992). Becoming biliterate: First language influences. In P. K. Matsuda & T. Silva (Eds.), *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing* (pp. 58–137). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Campbell, J., Li, M. (2008). Asian students' voices: An empirical study of Asian students' learning experiences at a New Zealand university. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(4), 375–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307299422>
- Chai, D. S., Van, H. T. M., Lee, J., & Wang, J. (2020). What do international students need? The role of family and community support for adjustment, engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), 571–589. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.1235>
- Dalhberg, K. (2009). The essence of essences – the search for meaning structures in phenomenological analysis of lifeworld phenomena. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Wellbeing*, 1(1), 11–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482620500478405>
- Di Maria, D. L. (2020). A basic formula for effective international student services. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), pp. xxv-xxviii. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2000>
- Durkin, K. (2004). *Challenges Chinese students face in adapting to academic expectations and teaching/learning styles of UK Masters courses, and how cross-cultural understanding and adequate support might aid them to adapt* (Doctoral dissertation). British Council, London.
- Eddles-Hirsch, K. (2015). Phenomenology and education research. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 3(8), 251–260. <http://www.journalijar.com/article/5631/phenomenologyand-educational-research/>
- Equipping children and young people for the future: Improving education in the countries of Central Asia. (n.d.). <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/14383.html>
- Geary, D. (2016). How do we get people to interact? International students and the American experience. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 527–541. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1094887.pdf>
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretative theory of culture. *In the Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.

- Gresham, C., Symons, C., & Dooley, P. (2013). Nice to meet you: Creating a space for intercultural engagement. Paper presented at the 16th International First Year in Higher Education Conference, Wellington. [http://fyhe.com.au/past\\_papers/papers13\\_C](http://fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers13_C)
- Gurel-Cennetkusu, N. (2017). International students' challenges in academic writing: A case study from a prominent U.S. university. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(2), 309–23. <https://www.jlls.org/index.php/jlls/article/view/676/317>
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. Guilford Press.
- Hu, M. (2014). Toward the Understanding of Chinese ESL writing. *English Today*, 117(1), 55–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078413000576>
- Huang, R. (2007). “A challenging but worthwhile learning experience!” Asian international student perspectives of undertaking a dissertation in the UK. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 6(1), 29–38. [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/johlste/vol6no1/huang\\_vol6no1.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/johlste/vol6no1/huang_vol6no1.pdf)
- IIE. (2015). *Enrollment by institutional type*. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Enrollment>
- IIE (2012). *The Institute of International Education*. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors>
- Kachru, Y. (2009). Academic Writing in World Englishes: The Asian Context. In: Murata, K., Jenkins, J. (eds) *Global Englishes in Asian Contexts*. Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230239531\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230239531_8)
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education. In P. K. Matsuda & T. Silva (eds.), *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing* (pp. 11–26). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1972). *The anatomy of rhetoric: Prolegomena to a functional theory of rhetoric*. The Center for Curricular Development.
- Koo, H. (2016). The global middle class: How is it made, what does it represent? *Globalizations*, 3(4), 440–453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2016.1143617>
- Kvale, S. (2008). *Doing interviews*. SAGE Publications.
- Lo, Y. (2010). Assessing critical reflection in Asian EFL students' portfolios: An exploratory study. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researchers*, 19(2), 347–355. <http://philjol.org/index.php/TAPER/article/view/1602>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenology research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Obeidat, B. F. (2017). Perceptions and interactions of American university students with Arab international students (Doctoral dissertation, Wichita State University, USA). [https://soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/14505/d17014\\_Obeidat.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/14505/d17014_Obeidat.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Okusolubo, G. S. (2018). Academic and social challenges faced by African international students in collegiate institutions in America. *International Journal of Economic Management Science*, 7(2), 514. doi:10.4172/2162-6359.1000514
- Palmer, M., Larkin, M., Visser, R. D., & Fadden, G. (2010). Developing an interpretative phenomenological approach to focus group data. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 7(2), 99–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880802513194>
- Phakiti, A., & Li, L. (2011). General academic difficulties and reading and writing difficulties among Asian ESL postgraduate students in TESOL at an Australian university. *RELC Journal*, 42(3), 227–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688211421417>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Sato, T., & Hodge, S. R. (2009). Asian international doctoral students' experiences at two American universities: Assimilation, accommodation, and resistance. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 2(3), 136–148. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015912>
- Singh, S. (2017). English as a tool of power, prestige and growth. *International Research Journal of Commerce, Arts and Science*, 7(2), 13–18.

- [https://www.academia.edu/23222668/English as a Tool of Power Prestige and Growth Sujan Singh](https://www.academia.edu/23222668/English_as_a_Tool_of_Power_Prestige_and_Growth_Sujan_Singh)
- Telbis, N. M., Helgeson, L., & Kingsbury, C. (2014). International students' confidence and academic success. *Journal of International Students*, 4(4), 330–341.  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v4i4.452>
- Tran, L. T. (2020). Teaching and engaging international students: People-to-people empathy and people-to-people connections. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), pp. xii–xvii.  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2005>
- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, 11(1), 80–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316>
- Vagle, M. D. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. The Athlouse Press.
- Vandrick, S. (2014). The role of social class in English language education. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 13(1), 85–91. doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2014.901819>
- Wang, C., Janet, N. A., Hyojin J. K., & Xiaodong, L. (2017). Why do international students avoid communicating with Americans? *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), 555–582.  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.288>
- Wang, Y. (2005). Experience of Asian-Chinese student in the United States: A case study. *Research in the Schools*, 12(1), 20–31.
- World Economic Forum. (n.d.). Which countries are best at English as a second language?  
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/11/which-countries-are-best-at-english-as-a-second-language-4d24c8c8-6cf6-4067-a753-4c82b4bc865b/>
- Wynne, D. M. (1997). *School experiences of successful adults with blindness*. (Doctoral dissertation). <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.odu.edu/docview/304382958?pq-origsite=primo>
- Yao, C. W., Garcia, C. E., & Collins, C. (2019). English as lingua franca: Exploring the challenges and opportunities of English language on Vietnamese graduate student learning. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education*, 4, 209–225.  
<https://doi.org/10.28945/4391>
- Zhang, Y. (2016). International students in transition: Voices of Chinese doctoral students in a U.S. research university. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 175–375.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083276.pdf>
- Zhang, Z. (2018). Academic writing difficulties of Chinese students: The cultural issue behind Chinese and British academic writing styles. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 17(2), 118–124. <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10570/10930>

**WOLAYAT TABASUM**, is a doctoral candidate in the higher education program at Old Dominion University. Her research agenda focuses on international students, quality assurance and accreditation, and women and gender. Email: [wtaba001@odu.edu](mailto:wtaba001@odu.edu)

**MITCHELL R. WILLIAMS**, is an Associate Professor in the Educational Foundation and Leadership Department at Old Dominion University.