

© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 10, Issue 4 (2020), pp. 934-953
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v10i4.1277
ojed.org/jis

Outside the Classroom: The Language of English and its Impact on International Student Mental Wellbeing in Australia

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ABSTRACT

International students from culturally and linguistically diverse countries travel to Australia because of the opportunity to study courses in the English language with some coming to this country just to study the language itself. Such desires moreover create students to engage in creative strategies to improve their language skills. This paper, however, suggests that the desire to be skilled in English through immersion in an English-speaking country like Australia creates challenges to the mental wellbeing of international students. Reporting on interview data with 47 international students of Asian descent in the Australian city of Melbourne, this paper reveals these challenges to include lived and perceived notions of self and belonging, as well as loneliness.

Keywords: Australia, Asian international students, challenges, creative learning strategies, English language proficiency, stress, wellbeing

What can we learn about Asian international students' relationship to the English language? By interviewing 47 international students of Asian descent in Australia, this paper argues that although international students desire to better their professional prospects outside their home countries by improving their English communication skills, the methods they utilize to do so leaves them insulated within their own international student networks and ultimately isolated from immersing themselves from Australian society. The insulation and isolation are incongruous to their very intentions for adjusting and adapting to everyday life in Australia as they navigate life overseas and their aspirations for further transnational mobility and global

citizenship. English-language learning, in other words, inadvertently creates unique yet worrying challenges to international student mental wellbeing outside the classroom – an issue which the literature on international student language learning in Australia does not cover in-depth. As transient migrants, international students are visitors in countries where they are often young people who are new to social and academic environments foreign to what they are used to while at the same time being away from their own support systems (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). The findings are relevant for our understanding of how international students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) meet the challenges of English language learning outside the classroom and how the perceived lack of English language proficiency leads to real concerns of individual wellbeing. The findings are also significant for continued understanding of the experiences of international students as transient migrant subjects in the overlapping migration-mobility-international education studies space.

International students in Australia see English as a significant skill to possess for two reasons. The first reason is that they consider English a passport for greater professional and education mobility, not only in Australia but also elsewhere. In other words, possessing good English-language skills is a necessary social and professional lubricant (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura & McManus, 2017) for long-term residency in Australia as well as for working and living in the cosmopolitan capitals of the English-speaking world (Gomes, 2015). In addition, international students consider themselves ‘global citizens’ because they are mobile actors who venture beyond their countries of birth for education (Bourn, 2009). The second and more pressing reason international students see English skill acquisition as important is that they see this language as a way of adjusting and adapting to life in Australia (Gomes, 2017; Benson Chappell & Yates, 2018). A good command of the English language not only helps with study but also with their negotiation of everyday life in a country that is culturally and linguistically different from what they are used to – yet keen to gain footholds on (Briguglio & Smith, 2012). Hence international students in Australia become heavily invested in bettering their English-language skills. Besides attending formal classes to improve their English speaking and writing abilities to fulfill their transnationally mobile aspirations, international students partake in immersion tactics such as viewing English-language media productions (e.g., Hollywood films and television programs) which they can easily access online and talking to their friends in English (Gomes, 2017).

The literature on English-language learning, especially in Australia, indicates two issues: (a) the desire international students have to be proficient in the English-language and (b) the classroom difficulties international students encounter when they are enrolled in and actively partake in English-language learning (Carey & Robertson, 2015). This paper, however, takes another different direction by pointing to the challenges associated with language learning *outside* the classroom. Here, reasons such as perceived racism from domestic students, the ease of identifying with other international students, and the almost exclusivity of international student friendship networks dominating international students’ lived experience indicate issues hampering students’ sense of belonging in Australia. This lack of sense of belonging can sometimes have more detrimental effects on the social and mental wellbeing of

international students where students not only cut themselves off from local Australian communities but also from other international students resulting in loneliness and isolation precisely because they are transient transnationals (Sawir et al., 2008; Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune 2011; Gomes, 2015; Gomes et al., 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In her work on the mental health of international students in Australia, Helen Forbes-Mewett (2019) clarifies that an “[u]nfamiliar academic environment, English language challenges, modes of teacher/student interaction’ contributes and compounds international student mental wellbeing” (p. 3). This is especially worrying since international students are at an age when mental health issues might arise. Forbes-Mewett also adds that “[a] reluctance to seek help due to cultural perceptions, help-seeking delays associated with stigma, fear of ‘losing face’ or reputation, or disclosing personal information were reasons given why international students avoid the use of counselling services” (p. 3). Hence students who are secluded with other international students or, worse still, isolated may not be getting the help they need (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Hence, what is largely missing from the literature on international student English-language learning in Australia is the impact caused by variables such as cultural, societal, and linguistic differences international students face in destination countries on language learning.

Insulated and Isolated: International Students as Transient Migrants

While migrants of any kind – settlers and non-settlers – face similar challenges such as adapting to the culture/s of the receiver nation and sometimes more sinister issues such as racism, both these broad groups of migrants though defined by their temporal status, are inherently different. Moreover, there is evidence that international students become insulated and isolated in Australian society, thus affecting their mental wellbeing.

Insulated: International Students Living in a Parallel Society

In previous writing, I (2015; 2017; 2018) argue that international students form a parallel society in Australia. By parallel society, she explains that while they may live in Australia and among Australians, they set themselves apart by creating groups and communities made up of other international students, whether co-nationals from the same region or elsewhere, for precisely reasons that are strongly associated with their status and experience as international students (Gomes, 2015, 2017, 2018). Hence while they may do similar activities as Australians, particularly their domestic student peers (e.g., having coffee in cafes), they do so with each other and not with other students, even course mates who they see in classes, tutorials, or lectures. Moreover, the international students she reports on see ‘Australian’ as ‘white.’ By ‘white’, they also include anyone who is not broadly of Asian and African appearances. So often, Australians of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean heritage would be considered ‘white.’ She also notes that international students interviewed

while acknowledging that there are Australians who are Asian-born or who grew up in Australia with some ethnic Chinese and Mainland Chinese international students referring to them as ABCs (Australian-born Chinese), admitted that they had next to no friends in this group despite them being good English- speakers. In a separate study of 6,699 international students in Australia, with 67 percent identifying themselves as from Asia, international students were asked whether they had friends who were Australian but who were of the same ethnicity as them. Less than 1 percent reported having friends in their social groups who were of the same ethnic group (Gomes et al., 2015). The assumption here is that Asian international students do not see Asian-Australians – those born and those who grew up in Australia - as friends. International students form strong bonds with other international students, often co-nationals but increasingly with international students from other countries, particularly from their own region (e.g., Asian international students with other international students from the region) and elsewhere. These bonds are formed based on a common identity as an international student where similar experiences as ‘foreign’ students. However, because international students are only maintaining friendship groups with other international students, they insulate themselves away from domestic students and the Australian on the whole (Gomes, 2018). While international students acculturate into Australian culture where they take on certain aspects of Australian culture (of university students) as part of their everyday lifestyle which are attractive to them (e.g., having coffee in cafes), they do so in parallel to Australian society since they only do this with fellow international students. In other words, international students become insulated within their own international student networks.

If international students choose to stay longer after graduation as skilled workers, permanent residents, or citizens, being excluded from Australian society has longer-term effects on social cohesion in Australia. Those international students I (Gomes, 2017) spoke to who expressed a desire for permanent residence after they finished their studies, explained that their reason for wanting permanent residence is that they felt that the pace of life in Australia was more to their liking. To them, this work-life balance was the primary aspect of Australian culture they were attracted to, with no international student mentioning Australian society as a driver for staying after graduation. And not because of Australian society. If international students are already living in a parallel society as international students, would they continue doing so with other international students-turned-permanent migrants? A more troubling issue which international students face is isolation.

Isolation

Research on international student wellbeing in Australia (Sawir et al., 2008) and elsewhere (Hendrickson et al., 2011) often express concern at the mental state of international students, pointing out that being in a foreign country while separated from family and friends have led to emotional and social dissonance such as loneliness and homesickness. While research has shown that over time in the country of study, international students learn to cope with living away from home and loved ones. However, for some international students, certain conditions affecting social

and emotional health, and therefore, mental wellbeing need to be addressed. Isolation particularly is an issue of concern which international education stakeholders must address. Again, in the previously mentioned study of 6,699 international students, 4 percent of respondents noted that they did not have any friends in Australia (Gomes et al., 2015). While the percentage may seem small, this group is still a matter of concern since they do not have support networks during their sojourn. Loneliness is a common wellbeing issue international students face because they do not feel included in their academic environment (Will, 2016). However, loneliness is not only prevalent in face-to-face interactions but also in the online environment. In their study of international graduate students' perception of academic and social isolation, Erichsen and Bolliger (2010) found that students felt isolated when enrolled in both face-to-face and online courses. The researchers further found that students who were enrolled in online courses felt even more academically and socially isolated than their counterparts enrolled in face-to-face courses. Various studies in the past decade have increasingly shown that international students suffer from mental and emotional issues precisely because they are living away from family and home-grown friends in a foreign country without cultural, language, and/or societal familiarity (Sawir et al., 2008; Hendrickson et al., 2011). Moreover, some may face direct, indirect, or perceived forms of racism, encouraging them to withdraw into their own worlds even more (Brown & Jones, 2013; Lee, Jon & Byun 2017; Gomes, 2017).

International Students are Transient Migrants: A Mobility Studies Lens

Traditional migration theoretical and analytical frameworks that almost wholeheartedly examine permanent migrant(ions) specifically in the areas of economics, race and ethnicity, social structure, and political/public policy should not be used to interpret and understand the agendas and aspirations of international students. This is because international students are transient migrants, and hence, have different agendas and aspirations to permanent settlers (new citizens and permanent residents) (Gomes, 2019). Their agendas and aspirations are different from migrants who want to make Australia a permanent home for themselves, their children, and sometimes wider family (e.g., parents). While permanent settlers may be concerned about issues of citizenship such as a sense of belonging in the adopted nation and societal acceptance by the citizenry (e.g., Wise, 2014; Fozdar, 2012; Hebbani, Colic-Peisker & Mackinnon, 2017), international students are not bound by such anchoring. Instead, as transient migrants, international students' residency status is determined by the temporary (student) visa. However, as I point out previously when understanding transient migrants as constantly mobile subjects, transient migrants, such as international students are open to their own (im)mobilities and residencies:

Some transnational transient migrants may not, for instance, want to prolong their overseas experience in the receiver country, while others may want to settle more long-term as permanent residents or even as citizens. The term transient migration thus allows for a manoeuvring of visa and residency statuses within these two categories, for example, individuals on

international student visas may shift to working professional visas. Transient migrants thus are transient within the temporary migrant space as they move and upgrade their visa statuses and conditions. In other words, while “temporary” implies a direct and opposing situation to permanence, “transient” is not so limited and instead allows for mobility within the term itself. (Gomes, 2018: 3-4)

International students’ agendas thus are fuelled by their aspirations of (im)mobility. In other words, international students may want to be immobile by staying in the receiver country whether in the short term or for longer periods of time; be mobile then immobile by returning to the sender country and possibly being mobile again; or continue their mobilities by going elsewhere with the prospect of anchoring outside the sender nation and the current country they are transient in. Because international students and permanent settlers have different agendas and aspirations, approaches to language should not be framed from a non-settler/citizenship structure. Most academic writing in Australia concerning language, particularly English as a language of communication for non-native speakers within the multiculturalism and diversity framework (e.g., Matthews, 2008) argues that the Australian cosmopolitan society needs to accept that different migrant communal societies speak languages other than English, sometimes almost exclusively. This paper thus points out that the English language provides a pivot in the way in which we understand the agendas and aspirations of international students, and thus adding another level of understanding of the different experiences and hues of transnational migration and mobility. Additionally, this paper starts to plug a gap in the literature on English-language learning in Australia by highlighting the challenges international students face outside the language classroom in terms of their sense of belonging in Australia and, inadvertently, their mental wellbeing. Before diving into discussions of the significance of the English-language in Australia, let me first briefly introduce Australian international education, a sector which has not only led to significant numbers of foreign students entering into the country, but also contributes billions into the economy through study (e.g., full fees) and non-study (e.g., rental accommodation) related expenses.

The International Education Sector in Australia

International education in Australia had its humble beginnings in the 1950s with small scale friendship programs. For instance, from 1951 and right through the next three decades, Australia became a destination country under the Colombo Plan program, where sponsored students from soon to be decolonized nations and former colonies in the British Commonwealth entered the country to be trained in skills that would assist in the economic, infrastructural and social development of their sender nations. By the 1980s, however, Australia saw that international education was becoming an economic export boom as the country started to cater to the rising middle class from the Asian region who were hungry, particularly for tertiary education. Today, Australia has become a global player in the export of education in the region

by offering courses and qualifications which attract students from Southeast Asia and, increasingly, from Northeast and South Asia with plans to increase numbers from the Middle East and Latin American by 2025 (Australian Government, 2016). By the end of 2017, education services brought in upwards of AUD\$30.9 billion through full fee-paying international students, the majority of whom are enrolled in the higher education sector. International students who number approximately 624,000 during this period come from 194 different countries, with China and India contributing the largest numbers (Australian Government, 2018). By 2025, Austrade, which is the Australian Trade and Investment Commission, predicts the following for its international education sector:

- Australia's onshore international education sector is forecast to grow from 650,000 enrollments today to 940,000 by 2025 (which equates to a compounding annual growth rate of 3.8 percent).
- The international education sector's contribution to export earnings is expected to almost double to in excess of \$33 billion by 2025.
- The top eight source markets for onshore international learner enrollments across all sectors in 2025 are expected to be China, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Nepal, Malaysia, Brazil, and South Korea. Much of the growth in onshore learner enrollments will be driven by Asia – in particular China, India, Nepal, Vietnam, and Thailand.
- Over the period to 2025, the fastest growing sectors in onshore international education are expected to be higher education and VET (in percentage terms). By 2025, these two sectors are expected to account for 72 percent of all onshore international learner enrollments.
- China is set to remain Australia's largest source market for onshore enrollments in 2025 and is expected to occupy the largest number of higher education, schooling, and ELICOS¹ enrollments. The largest number of VET onshore enrollments in 2025 are forecast to come from India (16 percent), Thailand (eight percent) and South Korea (seven percent).

From Austrade (2018).

While there are high school-going international students in Australia, their numbers are not comparable to those who are undertaking post-secondary study in universities, vocational education and training (VET) institutes and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) colleges².

¹ ELICOS is also currently known as English Australia.

² The term 'overseas student' was used more frequently in the 1980s and 1990s before the current term 'international student.'

English Language Learning in Australia

Proficiency in the English language is considered by non-English speakers as an incredibly important skill to possess. This is because English is deemed to be the currently accepted language for communication and professional and business mobility (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017). Moreover, English language proficiency is thought to be social currency in some cultures. In Japan, for instance, knowing English is looked upon in a positive light even though it is not a language that might be used as a language of communication in Japan (Tsuboya-Newell, 2017). In Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe, there are growing numbers of both foreign and locally owned private and public (government-funded) service providers specializing in teaching English. The British Council, for example, is perhaps the most respected English language teaching organization with over a hundred centers around the world. The British Council - ‘the United Kingdom’s international organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities’ (The British Council, 2018) – not only teaches English but also administers the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is a well-regarded and universally recognized English language test for non-native speakers for the purpose of further education in English and international mobility in English-speaking countries such as Australia. Often English teachers in the British Council and other language learning service providers employ native speakers from the United Kingdom and Australia.

International students from culturally and linguistically diverse countries across all education sectors (e.g., higher education, vocational and technical training, and schools) are arguably attracted to Australia as a place to study because English is not only the medium of instruction but the national language³. Learning and improving language skills through non-language specific courses is not a new phenomenon with international students traveling to places where they would like to improve their spoken and written abilities with countries where English is a native language being the most popular destination for such purposes⁴.

³ While there is literature on permanent residents and international students in Australia pointing to education as a pathway for residency (e.g., Baas, 2010 and Soong, 2015), a recently released report by the Australian Government (2018) on migration trends tells another story. Here the report noted that in the period 2000 to 2014, only 16 percent of international students converted their status to permanent resident. Previous studies made links between international education and permanent residence primarily because ethnographic work was confined to former international students who were already permanent residents (Soong, 2015) and the focus on specifically students who expressed aspirations for permanent residency (Baas, 2010).

⁴ While non-English speaking countries such as France and China attract international students who study non-language related courses in these places as part of their own desires and aspirations for language learning – in this case, French and Mandarin – countries where English is not the native or national language also offer English-

Likewise, in her work on English-language skills transnational education, Phan Le-Ha (2017) notes that even students who enroll in Western ‘English’ institutions in their home countries do so because both parents and students feel that they will be getting an ‘English’ degree and that they will be improving their language skills since courses are taught in English and an expectation that enrolled students will also be conversing in English. Hence, Western institutions from English-speaking Australia and the United Kingdom, which have opened campuses in non-Western countries (Dubai, Vietnam, and Singapore) are attractive to local (international) students. Students, in other words, enroll not for the courses but to improve their English-language skills since English is viewed as a language of social-economic mobility. Clearly, English language skills are significant not only for the present but for the professional futures of international students.

However, international students who are not very well versed in the language also struggle in their courses – particularly at university - with their spoken and written English (Arkoudis and Doughney, 2014). This has resulted in unfortunate grievances by both teaching staff and domestic student peers who find this lack of English language proficiency difficult for teaching and learning with calls for language proficiency courses to be incorporated into university courses for international students (Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley and Doughney, 2014). The negativity surrounding international students and their English language skills, as mentioned in the introduction, is not limited to the education space but a widely held view by the Australian general public.

To improve their English language skills, international students enroll specifically in English language courses in Australia. Twenty percent of Australia’s 792,422 enrolled international students⁵ (Australian Government, 2017) – some of whom are enrolled in 2 or more courses - are in institutions offering ELICOS (*English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students*) courses in order to improve their language skills. ELICOS courses prepare and test students on a number of popular English language tests which include IELTS, TOEFL IBT (Test of English as a Foreign Language internet-Based test), PTE (Pearson Test of English), CAE (Academic Cambridge English: Advanced test (also known as Certificate in Advanced English), OET (Occupational English Test), and TOEFL PBT (TOEFL Paper-Based Test is accepted in a number of countries where IELTS is not available) (ELICOS, 2018). Most students enroll in ELICOS courses before embarking on the next stage of their education journey, often in higher education institutions in Australia, while others just want to improve their language skills as they see Australia as the best place to do so.

language courses in order to attract international students. China increasingly offers English language courses despite Mandarin being its national language.

⁵ This number is inflated because while there were over 624,000 international students in Australia in 2017, some of these students were also enrolled in other courses; thus, they were ‘enrolled international students.’

Going overseas to an English-speaking country to study English presents challenges to the transient international student. The literature on English-as-a-second-language learning in the home country often tells us that students encounter a range of challenges such as lack of language immersion, quality of teachers, pedagogy, and so on (e.g., Phan, 2018). Likewise, the literature on international students and their English-language learning (in Australia and elsewhere) reveal similar classroom and pedagogical issues (e.g., Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley, & Doughney, 2014; Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014). This paper, however, highlights the troubling wellbeing issues confronting international students in their quest to better their English-language skills in order to realize their aspirations and ambitions.

In this paper, I look at the significance of English language proficiency among a group of international students living in Melbourne in the state of Victoria; and the strategies they take to improve this proficiency and the issues around belonging and mental welfare and wellbeing associated with their quest. In the state of Victoria, international education is the biggest export earner, and in 2017, it was worth \$9.1 billion to the state economy while supporting 58,000 jobs (State Government of Victoria, 2018). International education has also changed the ethnographic and urban landscapes of Melbourne city and the surrounding suburbs, which support universities and private colleges – both of which have ELICOS courses. In 2016 there were 200,000 international students studying in the state, with a quarter of the students living in the Melbourne Central Business District while a third living in neighboring Carlton (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). These areas in Melbourne are host to building developments and businesses catering to the growing numbers of international students, such as accommodation and retail.

METHOD

This paper is part of a larger project study looking at the everyday lives of transient migrants (international students, exchange students, working holiday visa holders, 457 visa holders, and bridging visa holders) in Australia and Singapore. This 3-phased project involved collecting data from 201 interviews, 40 journal entries, and 385 responses to a survey of transient migrants across both countries between 2013 to 2014. Participants were asked a series of questions about their self-perceived identities (i.e., who they think they are), their social networks (i.e., friendship groups), media consumption (e.g., what they watched for entertainment and news online), communication use (e.g., what social media platforms they use) and aspirations for the future (e.g., where they saw themselves living and working after graduation).

This paper, however, specifically looks at interview data (Phase 1) gleaned from forty-seven Asian international students studying at Melbourne higher education institutions: universities and colleges. While this project never sought to understand English proficiency among international students, nor were participants asked about their attitudes towards English-language, the Asian international student participants in Australia brought up this topic when discussing their social networks and aspirations. Here the 47 Asian international students who participated in the Australian leg of this project considered English language proficiency a significant skill to have and resorted to various ways of improving their language abilities. Ethics

approval for this study was granted by the RMIT College Human Research Advisory Network committee (CHEAN A-2000827-01-13). Respondents were recruited through advertisements in the Australian online classified website Gumtree, through colleagues from various Victorian universities (e.g., RMIT University, La Trobe University, and Melbourne University), through international student society groups, through the City of Melbourne, and through the snowball effect where respondents brought along their friends for scheduled interviews with the researchers. The advertisements requested respondents over the age of 18 who have lived in Australia for a minimum of 3 months. Participants were remunerated with a \$30 shopping gift voucher each for their time.

The respondents were interviewed in focus groups, small groups and as individuals in addition to a short survey which captured their background information such as age, gender, country of birth/citizenship, ethnicity(s), number of years in Australia to date, course of study/work, media use and hobbies. Two focus groups with 3 and 7 international students, respectively, took part in the pilot study of this project. There were 13 individual interviews, while the rest were interviewed in small groups of no more than two respondents each. The data in this paper is reflective of the open-ended questions that were asked pertaining to respondents' social networks (friendship networks/groups), their impressions of Australian society, and entertainment media consumption. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on the willingness of the respondents to go into more depth. This study's research strategy was amended from focus groups to individual and small groups because both focus group sessions ran for between 90 minutes to 150 minutes longer than the anticipated 1 hour.

Table 1 provides a demographic breakdown of the students. It shows that international students pursue a variety of diploma/degree programs across a wide cross-section of disciplines and come from a range of countries in Asia. It also indicates that most respondents have been studying in Australia for more than a year while half work part-time.

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of Asian International Students ($N = 47$)

Variables	Information
Gender	M (18) F (29)
Age Range	19 to 24 (28) 25 to 29 (15) 30+ (4)
Education Pursuit	ELICOS (8) Bachelor degree (19) Masters degree & higher (20)
Home Country	Bangladesh (2) China (8)

	India (6)
	Indonesia (3)
	Japan (1)
	South Korea (4)
	Malaysia (5)
	Pakistan (3)
	Singapore (8)
	Vietnam (6)
	New Zealand, originally China (1)
Length of stay in	3 months (3)
Australia at the time of	3.1 to 6 months (5)
interview	6.1 months to 1 year (7)
	1 year 1 month to 2 years (15)
	2 years month to 3 years (7)
	3 years 1 month to 4 years (8)
	4 years 1 month and more (3)

An issue this study encountered with the interviewees, which is relevant to this paper, is that some students had problems understanding some of the interview questions; in particular, those questions connected to identity. For instance, some could not understand what was meant by 'identity' in terms of the concept itself. Hence the question on identity was readjusted to: 'who do you think you are.' While those who had difficulty with English may have struggled a little during interviews, they persevered and were keen to answer the questions as best they could. Moreover, they insisted on conversing in English despite being in focus or small groups with others – often friends that came with them as interviewees – with who they shared common mother tongues. This study also learned about the bond English creates among international students who desire to better their language skills coupled with their desire to improve their English with each other. For instance, two university-going international students interviewed for this study were friends with each other, meeting at an ELCOS class a year earlier. One was a female postgraduate from South Korea and another male postgraduate from China. The South Korean respondent found understanding some of the interview questions challenging because they were in English. However, whenever she had difficulty, she turned to her Chinese friend, who attempted to help her language skills and reiterated what was asked into simpler English so she could understand. They also revealed that their close friends at the time of the interview were fellow students they met during English language classes who were now studying at various higher education institutions in Melbourne. Why is English language proficiency important to the international student respondents, and what are the strategies students use to improve their language skills?

RESULTS

Acquiring English-language Proficiency: Conventional and Creative Strategies

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the ability to speak good English - for international students - is equated with success and is highly desirable (Piller and Takahashi, 2006). As inferred to earlier, affluent and increasingly affluent Asian countries such as Japan and China, respectively, have English-language schools staffed by native speaking English-language teachers from Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and America. These schools are filled with locals wanting to acquire English-language skills, which they see as a form of social capital and an identifier of success (Yang, 2016). However, traveling to an English-speaking country in order to study in English and where English is the medium of instruction is considered even more prestigious since this allows students of English to differentiate themselves from those who are still in the home nation.

The international students interviewed in this study were committed to improving their English language skills and used a variety of expected and creative ways to do so. Unsurprisingly, enrolling in English language courses (ELICOS) were good ways for them to improve their language proficiency with eight students actively doing such courses. Other students, however, were alumni of ELICOS prior to their undergraduate/postgraduate study, while others might enroll in such courses while completing their university degrees as implied by the Chinese national in the previous section.

The most creative way in which respondents stated how they improved their language skills was by engaging in English-language media productions such as film and television together with looking through YouTube sites such as TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) Talks in order to improve their language skills. The intention to learn English was not surprising for some of those interviewed since they were specifically in Australia as English-language students. A 19-year-old Vietnamese male who is an undergraduate in Melbourne, for example, states that he has been studying English from a young age and grew up watching English-language television shows and films. His intention to ingrain himself in the English language is strong while at the same time clarifying that he is not interested in Vietnamese media or accessing it while in Australia. He studied English from a young age and has lived in the U.S. For him watching television helps him learn a lot about English:

Actually, yeah, it's quite helpful for me like when I watching TV for subtitle — English subtitle, I learn a lot of from these, I learn a lot of like — a lot or a lot of sentence.

Though respondents such as those above may watch programs and listen to music in their own languages either from their home nations or from other countries and cultures (e.g., ethnic Chinese respondents outside of China consuming music, films, television, and internet-productions from Taiwan and Hong Kong), this study reveals that respondents engage more with English-language American productions than any other language mediums. Moreover, they prefer English language productions made

outside of Australia. In Australia, the only locally made television shows which respondents watched are reality franchises, which reflected English-language (American) music such as *The Voice* (de Mol, 2012-present) and non-culturally specific but English-language cooking shows such as *Masterchef* (Roddam 2009-present).

Generally, the respondents largely prefer to listen to English language music from the United States/United Kingdom, such as New Direction and to watch television shows and films from the Hollywood entertainment industry. They also preferred reading online news programs that are American and United Kingdom dominated, the Cable News Network (CNN) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) particularly. While both CNN and the BBC are well established and widely known popular news agencies, they are also generally accepted as international news specialists. International student respondents have known CNN and the BBC from their home nations as international news specialists and would turn to them while in the host nations more so than the nationally based news sites reflective in Australia. While the commercial and government-funded news agencies in Australia (e.g., Channel 10 and Australian Broadcasting Corporation, respectively) are understandably and necessarily parochial with their reporting, they do report on international news; they are still not the news agencies of choice for respondents⁶.

International students interviewed provided different reasons for not listening to or reading news from host nation news sites. These included a disinterest in the politics and the experiences of the host nation, with the exception being issues that touched them directly (e.g., changes in permanent migration policies). International students also could not identify with the issues affecting the host society nor the ways in which English or their ethnic cultural languages were spoken in the host nation. These reasons reveal a desire instead to feel 'international' and cosmopolitan rather than local. Respondents here thus revealed more than just 'a sense of non-national affiliation' (Inglis & Delanty, 2011, p. 1) but rather the complexities of being a global citizen whereas Inglis and Delanty (2011, p. 1) point out, is about 'a much wider range of issues, all of which are to do with how to think and act in ways that systematically take account of living at a time of wide-ranging a deep-seated global connectivity among all people on the planet'. Ironically in order to be cosmopolitan through what they perceive to be the language of cosmopolitanism – English – international students may end up cutting themselves off from local society because of a lack of local cultural touchpoints which allow them, not only to form a sense of belonging while in Australia, but also opportunities to converse in English with native speakers. Achieving the latter point, however, is not as easy to facilitate for internationals students due to perceived notions of racism they feel they face.

⁶ Singapore's entertainment and news outlets — whether government-funded (e.g. Mediacorp) or international (e.g., BBC) are regulated by the government.

'Because My English Very Poor so I Can't Communicate Very Well': The Stress of English in the International Student Lived Experience

The international students interviewed, too, stated that they wanted to improve their English-speaking skills because they saw possessing proficiency in English as a positive step for their future and a personal commodity to possess for their global mobility. They expressed a desire to live and work (and some noting to study) in the English-speaking financial capitals of New York and London. In order to work and/or study in these highly desirable locations, respondents felt that they needed to possess very good English language communication skills in order to not only enter into the job market and/or be accepted into institutions there but also to navigate their social relations with people who live in those locations. Likewise, respondents who expressed a desire to live in Australia after graduation for longer periods of time as permanent residents or skilled workers felt that having a good command of the English language would hold them in good stead among the citizenry. As the following male Chinese national explains:

I try to talk with them but maybe because my English very poor so I can't communicate very well. And also they maybe don't want to make the situation become too awkward, so they just stop it to talking with us, so maybe I, just think I need to improve my English skill and try to talk with them and living to ... to feel suited ... Australia.

Meanwhile, a popular yet unconventional way of improving their English-speaking skills was speaking with other international students despite their and their peers' level of English proficiency. The following female South Korean student, for instance, explains that she prefers to speak English with other international students – mostly from Taiwan and China – because she becomes embarrassed to speak to native (Australian) speakers who she feels have superior language skills by comparison. She explains:

I also feel very stressful to talk with local students because their speaking is very fast and they, even they, I think even they can't guess which words we can't get it, because they haven't been in, like a situation, they are natural English speaker.....But among international students, even though some of student, if English is really bad we can just understand.

Clearly, both these respondents feel that being proficient in English is of vital importance to their stay in Australia. However, while the Chinese male student tells us that a good command of the English language will help him assimilate better into Australian society, the South Korean female student reveals that she is more comfortable talking in English to her other international student friends. For her, the parallel society of international students (Gomes, 2015) she is a part of, provides her perhaps a sense of belonging with other international students in Australia but not with Australian society itself. While it is clear that the international students interviewed did not only value English but also used a variety of (formal and more so

informal) measures to improve their spoken language skills particularly, the methods used might well contribute to them insulated within their own international student networks and ultimately isolated from immersing themselves among native English-speaking Australians. What these respondents reveal here is their perceived understanding of their (lack of) relationships with Australians, which they directly equate to their inability to speak English. Here they associate their sense of acceptance with Australians and therefore belonging in Australia with his English-language skills. While on one level their insecurities might be self-perceived, on another, there might be some truth to his sensitivities regarding his language skills. In previous work I conducted on Singapore, transient, migrants and language, she argued that the ability to speak English, particularly localized English, was important for integration (2015). Singaporeans, for instance, complained incessantly online that one of the issues they took issue with transient migrants is their inability to speak Singapore English or Singlish as it is called. Additionally, she found that Singaporeans who she spoke to were angry that some transient migrants were unable to converse in basic English. They felt that as foreign guests and future permanent residents working and studying in Singapore, transient migrants should learn how to speak basic English in order to communicate with Singaporeans. The prominent theme that was most brought up by Singaporeans was that they felt alien in their own country because the transient migrants were not conversing in a common language often used by Singaporeans themselves to communicate with each other⁷.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper discusses the significance of English language skills for international students in Australia. It highlights how international students in Australia not only value the English language as a skill to have for everyday living in Australia but also for their futures. Additionally, this paper describes how international students resort to both conventional and creative yet informal ways of improving their language skills, which they incorporate into everyday living in Australia. The conventional ways of improving their English-language skills primarily relate to enrolling in ELICOS courses an acronym for English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas

⁷ Anecdotally, in discussions with Singaporean friends about the use of English in Singapore, I was told that speaking good English is now valued among Singaporeans. They noted that Singaporeans who went to schools, which emphasized spoken and written English as a vital part of the curricular were held with much esteem. Schools that commonly emphasized English in this way were the Catholic mission schools. These schools, although founded by Catholic missionaries during the colonial period of Singapore's history, are governed by the nation's Ministry of Education, just like any other school in Singapore. However, internally these schools strived to produce students with excellent English communication skills and take pride in their students doing exceptionally well in English-language examinations during the national assessment programs such as the Cambridge 'O' and 'A' levels.

Students; while the creative yet informal ways include social relations between international students and turning to English-language entertainment and news media from the United States, the United Kingdom, and, at a lesser level, Australia to improving English proficiency. So, what practical implications can we develop from knowing that English has meaningful significance for international students that go beyond study?

To be skilled in English is vitally important to international students in Australia who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds where English is a foreign language. While this paper notes that international students see the value and benefit of possessing a good command of the English language, it also highlights significant yet unintentional negative outcomes of the creative strategies international students use to learn English: insulation and isolation. Would these wellbeing issues be even more pronounced as tertiary institutions increasingly turn towards blended learning? In other words, could blended learning – which is a combination of face-to-face teaching and online learning styles – possibly result in international students becoming even more disconnected from the wider student community since they are able to engage in their courses without leaving their residence in Australia? Institutions thus need to put in place strategies that support international student welfare side by side new and emerging pedagogies in order to cope with possible student wellbeing issues. One method of facilitating a sense of belonging for international students with bettering their command of English could be done at the institutional level.

In yearly international student satisfaction surveys such as the International Student Barometer (i-graduate International Insight, 2018) which are conducted in key English-speaking Western international education destinations the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States and Canada, international students often say that while they are largely satisfied with their study experience in Australia yet unhappy that after their entire degree or diploma, they did not make any Australian friends. Moreover, such surveys also reveal that international students who are not satisfied with their study experience are a source of negative publicity for countries and institutions since respondents admit that they would actively dissuade potential students from enrolling. The classroom (and lecture theatre) environment, ironically, where international and domestic students meet is the environment where students from both sides barely talk to each other. Research into international student wellbeing often notes that having meaningful relationships with domestic students leads to happier and more adjusted international students who otherwise might suffer from emotional and mental issues connected with being away from family, friends, and the familiarity of home country, culture, and society. To plug this friendship gap, institutions could devise programs – possibly introducing them at orientation - to help international students with language. Such programs openly facilitate mixing between international and domestic students, hence allowing international students the opportunity to make inroads into possible meaningful relationships with domestic students in a more conducive environment arrangement outside of the classroom.

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