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Exploring the Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies and Solutions for International Students in Academic Environments through Communication Accommodation Theory

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the communication hurdles that international students face in academic environments filled with ongoing interactions. Using communication accommodation theory (CAT) as a guide, it highlights the experiences of eleven international students along with the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The data were analyzed thematically, classifying communication approaches on the basis of the concepts of convergence and divergence of CAT. The results show that international students struggle with language proficiency, varied cultural expectations, and concerns regarding cultural competence and inclusivity. Participants shared their techniques, such as active listening, note-taking, expanding their vocabulary, and utilizing language-learning resources effectively. The study wraps up with suggestions based on participant feedback, including promoting inclusive interaction practices and creating an intercultural training program.*

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, International Students, Study Abroad, Communication Accommodation Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

As universities grow more connected around the world, international students find themselves managing intricate communication settings that influence both their academic journeys and their social lives. The research took place at a public university located in the western United States that hosts more than 150 international students and scholars representing more than 50 countries. Their experiences are molded by the institutional frameworks set in place to support them, particularly the Global Engagement Office, the hub for international student services. This office strives to cultivate an inclusive atmosphere by offering programs that prioritize intercultural flexibility, adaptability, and community development. A standout initiative is the university town's International Friendship Program (MIFP), which connects international students with local host families, facilitating cultural events designed to enhance intercultural understanding and ease students' integration into the local community.

Additionally, academic support services significantly increase international students' communicative experiences. The University's Writing Centre, which is part of the Office of Student Success, provides tutoring and writing support for students across all proficiency levels. This assistance is especially beneficial for international students who navigate the complexities of academic standards, language conventions, and culturally nuanced communication practices.

However, despite these supportive resources, international students often face hurdles in communication within academic environments, such as engaging in classroom interactions, adjusting to new discourse practices, and managing cross-cultural expectations. Exploring how these students develop their communication strategies and the various factors influencing these strategies can shed light on their academic and social integration.

In this study, communication accommodation theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles, explains how individuals change their communication styles during interactions to respond to social and cultural factors. convergence, a key concept involved when speakers change to

become more like others, and divergence, where communicative differences are emphasized (Giles & Ogay, 2007). CAT is important to this study because international students often adjust their communication strategies in response to language barriers, accents, and academic expectations. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What communication challenges do international students encounter in academic interactions with tutors and professors?
- **RQ2:** What accommodation strategies, including convergence and divergence, do international students use to navigate communication challenges?
- **RQ3:** What improvements do international students suggest for academic support interactions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students: Contributions and Challenges

International students bring significant value to host universities through their diverse cultural, academic, and economic inputs. Research indicates that they tend to be high performers who contribute varying perspectives and bolster the internationalization of institutions (Gartman, 2016; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Poppov et al., 2022). Their presence, both in the United States and worldwide, enhances scientific research and prepares local students for global engagement (Institute of International Education, 2012).

However, these contributions do not come without their hurdles. International students often encounter various challenges when they are acclimating to new academic and cultural landscapes. They may struggle with language difficulties, acculturation stress, and learning new instructional norms (Karakuş 2025; Almurideef, 2016; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Gartman, 2016). Such obstacles can influence their identity development and affect their comfort levels and participation in academic settings (Le Ha, 2009). While previous studies address broad acculturation processes (Berry et al., 1987), few microlevel studies have focused on how international students adapt to their communication styles during interactions. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) serves as a valuable approach for exploring this gap.

Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies

Research illustrates that international students employ a range of communication strategies to address linguistic and cultural barriers. These

strategies include modifying their speech rates, articulation, and vocabulary, as well as implementing nonverbal communication cues and self-monitoring actions (Park et al., 2017). Students may often rephrase or reiterate points to overcome challenges linked to accented English or restricted fluency, which can impede their active involvement in academic discussions (Weizheng, 2019).

Acculturative stress can also shape how these students communicate, prompting them to adjust to new cultural norms and expectations amid psychological and social pressures (Yang, Dunleavy & Phillips, 2015; Berry et al., 1987). Research on academic communication reveals that students might resort to rehearsals, structured presentation methods, and memorization to alleviate oral communication anxiety (Amiri & Puteh, 2021). Together, these insights shed light on the complexity of communication strategies, although a consistent theoretical framework such as CAT is not frequently leveraged to clarify why such strategy selections differ across contexts.

Institutional Communication and Support

The communicative practices of institutions play a crucial role in shaping the academic experiences of international students. Universities can enhance their environments by incorporating intercultural communication into the curriculum, crafting inclusive classroom settings, and offering culturally aware support services (Zhai & Razali, 2021). However, many institutions lack cohesive communication strategies targeting international student populations (Ammigan & Laws, 2018; Steyn, 2002), which hinders the ability of faculty and advisors to effectively address communication-related issues. Previous work has shown that international students use strategies such as clarification, repetition, active listening, and communicative adaptation when navigating academic and support environments (Park et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2016).

Cross-Cultural Communication in Academic Settings

Classroom communication challenges are well recognized. Numerous international students have limited knowledge of U.S. academic practices and expectations, complicating their efforts to seek help and participate (Qu, 2018). Language barriers, perceived discrimination, and cultural misunderstandings contribute to academic pressure, social isolation, and poor performance (Chen, 1999; Yang, Dunleavy & Phillips, 2015; Zhang & Giles, 2018). Cultural differences further impact message interpretation and engagement styles within

classrooms (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Glouslay, 2008). Research in multicultural group settings indicates that while communication obstacles often initially arise, these experiences can lead to heightened intercultural sensitivity as students adapt to each other's communicative approaches (Young & Schartner, 2013).

Research on international students in higher education has identified various communication challenges and adaptation processes. However, few studies focus on the specific communicative adjustments these students make during their everyday academic interactions, particularly through the framework of communication accommodation theory (CAT). This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how international students manage communication when they seek academic support and how accommodation behaviors arise within cross-cultural academic contexts.

Using CAT as a guide, we delve into the ways in which these students use convergence and divergence strategies to address language barriers, address accent-related issues, and meet academic expectations. Our analysis is based on observing interactions between international students and writing center tutors, along with a focus group that includes both tutors and international students. This approach helps us understand how accommodation practices evolve and impact communicative effectiveness.

Being interculturally flexible is key to successful communication in diverse academic environments, as it involves being aware of linguistic and cultural differences (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2021). By concentrating on how international students adapt their communication strategies in academic support situations, this study contributes to the scholarship on intercultural communication in higher education and provides practical insights for promoting more inclusive communication practices in public research universities.

METHOD

This study took an exploratory qualitative approach by using focus groups to delve into the communicative experiences of international students in academic support settings. Instead of aiming for statistical generalizability, the study focused on depth and collective understanding to uncover common communication challenges and strategies that might not be included in one-on-one interviews.

Participants were recruited from the University's Writing Centre and the Global Engagement Office. The study received Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Montana as exempt (IRB #30-24).

A total of twelve individuals participated in a two-hour, in-person focus group, which included eleven international students on F-1 visas and one American writing center tutor. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 years, and they came from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds across West Africa, Asia, North America, and Europe. Everyone involved gave informed consent before taking part. The participants' demographic information is summarized in Table 1. Before the focus group, a brief observational session at the Writing Centre was conducted to capture natural communication practices. (Buettner et al., 2025).

Data were gathered using semi-structured discussion questions, along with audio and video recordings and field notes. The audio recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy before analysis. The data were analyzed using open coding methods (Tracy, 2019), where the codes were organized into subthemes and broader thematic categories. The criteria established by Owen (1984), specifically repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness, guided the identification of significant meaning units. To maintain the authenticity of the speakers' voices, participant quotes are presented exactly as spoken. The themes were subsequently explored through deductive coding informed by communication accommodation theory to evaluate convergence and divergence behaviors.

Level 2 Heading: Data Collection

The sample size and gender distribution reflect the exploratory nature of the study and patterns of voluntary participation, rather than aiming for a demographic comparison. Consequently, the findings are considered illustrative of communicative experiences instead of representatives of all international students. The researcher had an insider-outsider perspective as an international student attending a U.S. university, which fostered rapport and open discussions. Throughout the analysis, reflexive practices, such as memo writing and ongoing theme reviews, were employed to address any potential interpretive bias while ensuring analytical rigor. Following the focus group, the researcher conducted a brief online brainstorming session with five participants to discuss recommendations for improving communication and support within academic settings.

RESULTS

The findings from the focus group highlight the importance of having comprehensive support systems to address the various communication challenges faced by international students in new environments. This indicates a significant issue that requires actionable solutions to assist these students. Addressing these matters can help alleviate this problem. Participants noted that communication difficulties were not just the responsibility of professors and tutors; they recognized that these challenges were often mutual, impacting both students and educators. International students acknowledged the importance of speaking up and discussing their communication challenges with their professors and tutors.

This aims to raise awareness among those dealing with imposter syndrome, encouraging them to share their struggles. It also helps professors and tutors understand their communication styles, which may unknowingly affect their students. Notably, in addition to language and accent, other factors that were not included in the earlier literature review emerged. Promoting an open dialog about language difficulties, speaking pace, or the comprehension of examples can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere. The participants shared their thoughts on how, as international students, they feel the need to adapt despite facing challenges. It is essential to learn from new experiences and to be curious about others, regardless of where you come from. If an American takes an interest in your culture, it is a perfect opportunity to share and learn from each other. You do not have to give up your culture; by showing interest in others, you enhance your own experiences.

RQ1 (Results) Communication Challenges

The communication challenges heading emerged from focus group data analysis as a reflection of the communication challenges that international students face. The participants in this study highlighted several communication hurdles, which I have grouped into three subthemes: language proficiency, cultural expectations, and cultural competence/inclusive context.

Theme # 1 Language Proficiency

The first theme focused on the verbal communication challenges participants faced with tutors and professors. The participants discussed barriers to accent and pronunciation, fast-paced speech, and difficulties communicating in English-only environments despite being multilingual. Challenges occurred in both tutoring sessions and classroom settings.

Participants also described how translating thoughts from multiple languages into English could be confusing and time-consuming.

Preeti, a graduate student from India, explained that her main challenge was not understanding concepts but adjusting to unfamiliar accents and pronunciation styles: “My main challenge is not understanding concepts no no.urm it is with their accent. I often struggle with pronunciation and some phrases, especially when certain terms used here are different from those used in India. This becomes particularly noticeable when I'm in new settings or with people I have not talked with before.” One of the greatest challenges for me is having to communicate only in English like wow! hmm like all the time. In my culture, we're used to speaking multiple languages.”

Mel, the writing center tutor, also shared that communication difficulties occurred from both sides of the interaction:

“As I engage more in these discussions and conversations, I have noticed that sometimes people struggle to understand what I'm saying. It makes me wonder if I'm speaking too softly or using the wrong words.”

Theme # 2 Different Cultural Expectations

This theme came about because international students sometimes got the wrong idea from professors' and tutors' body language. It also happened the other way around. Students misunderstand the signals from their tutors or professors, and these mixed signals can complicate communication, particularly in academic settings, potentially hindering the engagement and rapport-building between international students and educators.

During the group discussion, one participant shared that she noticed that her professor kept a considerable physical distance from her and rarely initiated physical contact, such as handshakes or pats on the back, which she expected on the basis of her cultural norms. Initially, she felt that the professor was being distant or unfriendly. However, she later learned that in terms of culture, personal space and physical contact are approached differently. This made her realize the importance of understanding cultural differences in nonverbal communication."

The participants also shared instances where in the other way around, they were misunderstood by their tutors and instructors because of a nonverbal cultural difference.

Fatima recounted this experience:

“I often find myself misunderstood by my professors because of my body language. In my culture, it is considered rude to make direct eye contact

with authority figures, like teachers or elders. So therefore, when I avoid eye contact during class discussions or meetings with professors, they might interpret it as disinterested or disrespectful. However, for me, it is just a sign of respect. It is frustrating because I'm trying to follow the cultural norms I have grown up with, but it is causing misunderstandings here."

Another aspect of this theme emerged when participants discussed feeling obligated to adopt an American style of communication. Preeti from India spoke on this issue by saying,

"My experiences have been similar, but I do not feel negatively about them. In my past experiences, I have noticed differences between how Europeans and Americans react when someone does not speak their language well. Europeans will appreciate effort and are willing to help, even if your accent is different. On the other hand, in America, there is often an expectation to speak English perfectly, with an accent that matches theirs. Sometimes, people even suggest trying to reduce or change your accent, which can be difficult. However, my experience might be different from others because most of my classes involve people working in conservation and wildlife. They are curious about different cultures and are interested in learning about India. Perhaps in other departments, the expectations could be different. So um well while there have been times when I have felt a bit strange when speaking, people have generally been understanding and polite."

Some participants raised the concern that some communication problems stem from the lack of intercultural exposure by many Americans. This lack of exposure forms the basis for some communication struggles that occur with international students and professors along with tutors. Adwoa from Ghana shared her opinions as follows:

"My experience has been quite different. When you speak, everyone generally understands what you're saying. However, I have noticed that the situation could be worse because of a lack of exposure. Perhaps in Europe or other parts of the U.S., there's more exposure, whereas here, it feels like a completely different world. When interacting with students such as I have observed, they may not have as much exposure to outside cultures. In certain classes, I have noticed presentations that have images of Western spaces and. This is something I notice, and it makes me think about the differences of experiences that could be added."

This same viewpoint was backed by Adwoa from Ghana, who also said that:

“Yes, it is obvious that some professors might not know much about other cultures. However, it is not fair to blame them for this. They might not have had many chances to learn about diverse cultures. Hahaaa, yeah! Therefore, it makes sense that they might not teach about them much; thus, instead of blaming them, we should understand that they might need more education and exposure to different cultures. If we give them a chance to learn and understand more, they can help students learn about the world in a better way.”

Participants also discussed the significance of context and cultural disparities between international students and their American educators. Adwoa from Ghana discussed the context and cultural disparities as follows:

“The main idea is that communication can be tricky because of differences in language and culture. Sometimes, people might not understand certain words or jokes, which can lead to confusion. For example, during lectures, everyone might laugh at something the teacher says, but you might not find it funny because it is not familiar to you. This shows how important it is to consider different backgrounds when talking to people. Urm ...like what's funny or normal in one place might not be the same in another. Understanding these differences can help everyone understand each other better.”

Lui from China also added onto this by saying,

“I remember working with a tutor from the Writing Centre; she said that a word I use in my dissertation proposal, “self-pleasing,” might not ...erm you know formal. She explained that for American people, it might have certain other meanings. I was not aware of this before because in China, people have the right to make themselves happy. Therefore, I thought “self-pleasing” meant happy yourself...like be happy! However, she told me that American people did not use that word in that way. Therefore, see differences like... um arise from differences in what is okay here and what is not.”

Mel, the tutor from the writing center, spoke on this by saying,

“This is true; most of them come to the center super confused on the material they are working on. In addition, most of the time it is because they are usually writing and interpreting things that are quite different from what I think their professors mean, so they usually say, hey you are American, do you think they mean this when they say this? And most of the time I do not know and cannot help because I am not in that class.”

RQ2 (Results) Communication Strategies utilized by international students

RQ 2 sought to understand what communication strategies international students use in academic settings to address communication challenges and how communication accommodation theory (CAT) helps us understand these strategies. The participants shared their thoughts, and the themes gleaned from this section include the following: engaging in active listening and seeking clarification, improving language proficiency, and learning new language practices.

Engaging in active listening and seeking clarification

Chen from China discussed this issue as follows:

“If there are only two people, and I find only me... haha. Yeah, I am unable to understand what the other person is saying, I feel comfortable asking them to repeat yeah..um. Um. yeah, if there are many people in conversation, I often not to ask for erm clarify erm for clarification, even if I am struggling hard to understand. I worry that it might worry erm the others, especially if they seem to be following along fine. I believe the approach differs in terms of situation and the number of people involved.”

Yun from China also added onto this by stating the following:

“Sometimes, I understand approximately 95% of what they talking. However, still 5% I cannot hahaahaa...yeah yeah urm They use local American ways to speak or cultural references different from me that are hard for me to obtain. Therefore, I ask them by email for ... to erm to clarify. Yes, to clarify. about what they mean or what they're talking about. Sometimes, when someone has a strong accent that I cannot understand, I ask them to repeat what they said. I might say, "Could you please say that again?" or "Sorry, I did not catch that." I think most people in Montana, especially in Missoula, speak a certain way, so if I want to communicate with them successfully, I need to make sure we're clear on what we're talking about. That is why I ask them to repeat themselves.”

Theme # 2 Expanding Vocabulary for Effective Communication

Yun from China discussed this point as follows:

“My professor, Dr. Matt, correct us on some words, like ‘usually’ He suggest using gestures or audio erm erm ways like erm like audio tapes or one-on-one English tutorials, to improve pronunciation. He said resources are helpful because they will errr...um help us to hear our own pronunciation and understand how we sound to others.”

Yun from China reiterated this point as follows:

“My professor explain different erm erm words used in America and teaches me how to use them. She always recommends articles, especially in the education fields, to help me understand. She suggests reading research work to learn more about specific topics.”

Theme # 3 Maximizing Language Learning Strategies

Sam from Ghana also shared the following:

“I found that reviewing lecture materials and having what I call my new word book to put...yeah.hahaaahha it is for new notes to review later, but yeah urm regularly was like doing reps at the gym for my brain, like it strengthened my language skills little by little.”

Gabriel from France shared the following:

“I learned most of my English watching the show “Friends” and using these free English learning apps online. It was very very helpful....”

Testing Participants’ communication strategies using CAT

To test whether CAT is a theory that participants engage in to understand its predictions in their daily communication strategies, I asked them about adjusting their speech when talking to tutors, professors, or peers.

Preeti from India shared this with me;

“I’m not changing my speech. I have lived enough years to not want to change it now. Hahaahaaa What if, when I go back to India, I do not have to change it back? Therefore, but yeah, I found myself subconsciously changing. Some things sound American. I would never get it right. Therefore, I stopped trying. However, then there are some things, like the ‘o’ and ‘r’ sounds, I try to change because no matter how hard I try, Americans do not pronounce it that way, so they do not get it. However, yeah, that is something that is impossible to change. However, I will not consciously change it.”

Abena said,

“Personally, I have changed. It is not just like a tiny amount. I have changed because I teach in classrooms where every day speaking is something I do, from the beginning to the end of the class. and it is very hard. Sometimes, when students complain that they cannot understand my accent, it makes me feel bad. It makes me feel like they came to class and did not hear anything. Therefore, I decided that I was going to learn how to speak like my students. Whenever they speak in groups, yeah like it was hard, so I will tell them, “I’m trying to learn how you people pronounce it, so just allow me to sit in and listen.” That is what I did.”

"I feel like it has helped me. It is not changing yourself; it is adapting to the situation. It is not changing your identity or whatever you think it is, but it is being at that point in time where you meet the needs. I'm not saying you should change everything, but for example, the way I pronounce "water," I can never change that, even when I try. However, if people do not understand me, I will try to see myself clearly, so as a teacher, I try. However, let me see how people pronounce things within their language over time. Therefore, like learning over time, I will recognize things and see how I can adjust if needed. I changed it myself at the beginning. It is just being able to present. In addition, so, either I am not effective in teaching or just exhausted."

Linisha from Haiti talked about this; she said,

"I have also noticed that like me ...um I tend to speak up less than I'd like to. Part of it is because I do not want to change my accent to fit in, yeah, no no. hahhaaa nooo. I want to stay true to myself. My accent is part of me ...um me from my background, including French, so it is not just one accent. People will say that I have an accent, and I know...yeah... but um, I also that that communication can be hard, and it will not be easy to overcome."

Interpreting these examples in terms of convergence and divergence reveals a range of communication strategies used by individuals in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

These responses highlight concepts within communication accommodation theory (CAT). Participants who adjusted their speech or communication styles showed convergence, whereas those who resisted changing their accents reflected divergence and the desire to maintain cultural identity. These examples show how international students balance adaptation and self-identity within academic settings.

Practical Implications

The final data gathered were rooted in the proposed recommendations discussed by participants aimed at addressing communication challenges. These recommendations emerged from discussion among participants, who expressed a desire for more attention to be given to the communication struggles faced by international students. Given that their communication challenges often go unheard or receive less attention than other difficulties do, participants urged for practical plans to be implemented by university stakeholders. The recommendations presented in this section were further informed by a follow-up online brainstorming session involving five participants from the original focus group.

Recommendation #1: Intercultural Communication Training

The participants emphasized the need for professors and tutors to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for international students. In response, an Intercultural Communication Training program for faculty and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) is proposed in collaboration with the University's Faculty Development Office as one online training session per semester under the institution's Teaching Excellence Initiative.

Amaka, an international student from Nigeria, shared this sentiment; "Right now, we're focusing on improving communication, but I'm thinking about a bigger change, like both sides should be involved. Currently, me as an international student, reading and um ...um ... like other American things are not big issues for me; I have figured out ways to manage. However, for those already comfortable in their local environment, they might not try to understand us. We need to find a way to say hey! like...like let them make that effort. Professors should know of international experiences, even if there are no international students in their class hmmm. Sorry, then they should make conscious efforts to include diverse ways, even if they do not have direct exposure. They should use things like books and articles; they can learn about different experiences and understand the differences between past and present ways that we think oh...um yeah."

Mel the tutor added onto this by saying;

"I truly agree with this point because with hearing all these challenges that international students go through, it is important that we get some form of intercultural training to help make the communication process much smoother. It will also be very exciting for me to learn more cultural communication strategies to make this process smoother for these students I help at the center; this is definitely a great idea."

Recommendation #2: Enhancing Support for International Students

The second practical solution that Abena, an international student from Ghana, mentioned was as follows:

"I was discussing these communication issues with a friend who studied in China, and I complained about the language barrier in class. They asked if I attended classes with Americans, when I said yes, hahahaa. .um.... He started to explain that in China, international students have separate classes where professors take their time to lecture. See, um... I think this could help solve the problem in different classrooms."

Adwoa, an international student from Ghana, also mentioned that: “The increasing acceptance of international students in universities is a good way to look at these challenges. Over time, I think more exposure to different accents and languages can help individuals become more um um used to um to understand linguistic differences.” (personal communication, March 2024)

Recommendation #3: Language and Context Support

Preeti from India spoke on this issue by saying that:

“I have been working on improving my language skills because I'm a language nerd. umm.umm It always bothers me that this university does not have a big Language Club, considering the diversity we have. We have students from all over the world who speak so many different languages. It would be fantastic to have a vibrant language club where people could come together and practice different languages. I'm aware that each department probably has its own language clubs, but I'm not sure how active they are hahaaha. I believe there should be um ...um ...effort to connect all these people who speak different languages and are interested in languages, even if they're not studying them formally. Just having that space to communicate in different languages, even if it is not our native tongue, would greatly improve my mood and attitude toward English. I'm constantly surrounded by English, and having chance to engage with other languages would be truly nice. Of course, I understand that this might not be financially good, but it is something I believe would greatly help our university experience.”

Preeti from India shared this view:

“It is simple. One easy solution to expose Americans to films from all over the world is by just getting them to watch them. Americans often you know will watch only their own films, but there's so much more out there. Personally, I learned English from films. Where else could I pick up slang? School does not teach you those things, but films do.”

Sam an International student from Ghana;

“I agree and this can go vice versa; I learned most of my English from watching the show “Friends” that helped me with my English pronunciations and like Lina said the ‘American slangs.’”

Samuel from Ghana also shared the following:

“The examples shown be considerate of other cultures and should be communicated as such. Like, for example, they should say, this is an American example, like do you have something similar in your culture to share?”

Discussion

This study highlights the communication hurdles faced by international students in academic environments and the strategies they adopt to overcome these challenges. Three primary categories of issues were identified: verbal communication barriers, cultural expectations alongside nonverbal misinterpretations, and insufficient intercultural competence in educational settings. In line with previous research (Chen, 1999; Yang, Dunleavy & Phillips, 2015), the students highlighted difficulties with accents, speech pace, pronunciation, and the expression of ideas in different languages. These challenges had a direct impact on their participation, understanding, and overall involvement in academic life. The rich linguistic diversity that students contribute to can sometimes lead to varying interpretations of specific words or phrases, which in turn can foster classroom misunderstandings (Adams, 1993). These observations emphasize the need for institutions to offer linguistic and communicative resources to facilitate equitable learning experiences.

The second theme highlights how cultural expectations shape our communication, especially in regard to nonverbal cues. Participants often misinterpreted gestures, tone, and personal space because of differences in cultural norms, reinforcing the findings of previous studies showing that nonverbal communication varies widely across cultures (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Glouslay, 2008). Students also shared that they felt pressured to adapt to American communication styles, shedding light on the complicated process of cultural adjustment (Imamura & Zhang, 2014). These insights underscore the importance for educators to recognize these cultural differences in communication norms.

The third theme revealed gaps in cultural competence and inclusiveness in educational settings. The participants felt that some educators had limited exposure to diverse cultures, which resulted in instructional examples, humor, or language that did not resonate with students. This observation supports Zhai and Razali's (2021) assertion that culturally aware advising and teaching are vital for the success of international students. By enhancing intercultural competence among staff, misunderstandings can be reduced, and more welcoming learning environments can be created.

Research Question 2 explored the strategies students use to navigate these challenges, tying them to communication accommodation theory (CAT). Students reported utilizing strategies such as active listening, seeking clarification, expanding their vocabulary, and using language-learning tools. These behaviors reflect convergence, where individuals

adjust their communication to fit the dominant cultural norms (Park et al., 2017). On the other side, some students reported that they preferred to maintain their unique communication styles, showing divergence and a desire to maintain their cultural identities. Together, these findings confirm that CAT offers a useful lens for understanding how international students manage communication in academic settings.

The participants also shared valuable suggestions for improving their communication experiences. These included increasing intercultural training for educators, enhancing language support, incorporating diverse cultural references in lessons, and offering flexible assessment methods. They emphasized the significance of one-on-one faculty interactions, language clubs, and clearer explanations of American cultural norms as effective strategies to aid their adaptation process. These recommendations align with the institutional strategies suggested in previous research (Zhai & Razali, 2021) and highlight practical approaches to fostering inclusivity. However, the findings of this study should be understood with caution given several limitations. The sample size was small and focused on a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, participants may have been influenced by personal expectations. Time constraints and limited observation opportunities might also have constrained the depth of the collected data. Finally, the dynamics of communication continue to change along with institutional changes and shifting student demographics, which this study may not fully encapsulate.

This study has several limitations that we should keep in mind when looking at the findings. First, it uses a small, qualitative sample from just one public research university located in the western United States. While this approach allowed for a deep dive into the communication experiences of international students, the insights gained are not meant to be applied broadly across all contexts. Instead, they provide a context-rich understanding of how students adjust their communication in academic support settings. Second, the sex distribution among the participants was not balanced, which might have influenced the perspectives shared in the focus group. Future research could benefit from having a more equal representation of gender or directly investigating how gender affects communication accommodation in academic environments.

Finally, the data collection mainly depended on a single focus group and observations, which limits the likelihood of methodological triangulation. Future studies could enhance their findings by including individual interviews, more observations, or longitudinal approaches to

determine how accommodation strategies evolve over time and in various settings.

Conclusion

This study explored the communication challenges and accommodation strategies that international students use in academic support settings. Guided by communication accommodation theory (CAT), the findings highlight how students navigate language barriers, cultural differences, and academic expectations through communicative adjustment. The study also emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive academic support practices in higher education.

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Table 1
Participant demographic information

Preeti	Female	India	International student
Mel	Female	United States	Writing Center Tutor
Abena	Female	Ghana	International student
Fatima	Female	Nigeria	International student
Adwoa	Female	Ghana	International Student
Lui	Female	China	International Student
Chen	Male	China	International Student
Yun	Female	China	International Student
Sam	Male	Ghana	International Student
Gabriel	Male	France	International Student
Linisha	Female	Haiti	International student
Amaka	Female	Nigeria	International Student

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