

Worlds apart: Representing multilingual international students' experiences of sociocultural adjustment through pictures

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This paper explores the experiences of sociocultural adjustment of four multilingual international students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) at a Canadian university. International students have been associated with negative images of failure and disruption to higher education on the basis of the hierarchy of cultures that privileges local and western knowledge. Multilingual EAL international students in particular have been broadly characterised as deficient speakers of English considering their non-native proficiency. From this point of view, multilingual international students tend to experience a kind of double deficit as they are compared to both local and native-speaker students. By employing interviews and photographs, this paper seeks to understand and represent the experiences of sociocultural adjustment of the four students and provides an emic, balanced account of each student's journey which also takes into account the ways in which the students exercised agency. Findings demonstrate the complexity of the international student experience and the importance of meaningful social interaction for multilingual international students to feel included in their communities. Photographs depict experiences from the students' perspectives which the students considered representative of positive sociocultural adjustment, but also of challenges in the same domain. This paper concludes with insights related to improving the sociocultural adjustment experiences of multilingual international students.

Keywords: multilingualism, photography, adjustment, international students, higher education, ESL

They think that we [international students] just stay in our dorms all day. That, like, we don't know how to do things and be successful *just because we're not from here.* (Pablo, Interview 1)

1 Introduction

International student mobility characterises one of the most important features of present-day higher education. The unprecedented number of international students moving around the globe has shifted the social, cultural, linguistic, and academic landscapes of institutions of higher education and continues to present

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both challenges and opportunities for growth “at home” and abroad (Robson & Wihlborg, 2019). According to statistics by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, over 5.7 million students were enrolled in institutions of higher education outside their home countries in the year of 2018 (UNESCO, 2019). In the Canadian context, colleges and universities have seen a rapid and substantial increase in the number of international students on their campuses. Such changes have emerged in response to political events of a global scale, particularly in the traditional top destinations—the United States and the United Kingdom (Choudaha, 2017)—as well as internal reforms to immigration policy within Canada that may be considered more attractive for international students (Government of Canada, 2018).

With the higher number of international students studying abroad, the need to better understand the students’ experiences becomes an even greater necessity. This is especially true for a body of scholarship that has been critiqued for homogenising the experiences, expectations, and needs of international students (Tavares, 2021a), and more often than not, focused overwhelmingly on the students’ challenges. The impact of such an emphasis has been that international students, particularly those from the global south, have been associated with negative images of failure and disruption to higher education (Lomer, 2018), as the opening quote illustrates. To complexify the situation, the majority of international students abroad are multilingual students who speak English as an additional language. Consequently, multilingual international students have been broadly characterised as deficient speakers of English on the basis of non-native proficiency (Bodis, 2021). From this point of view, multilingual international students tend to experience a kind of double deficit as they are compared to both local and native-speaker students.

This paper seeks to better understand how multilingual international students adapt to and within their new communities. Moving away from a perspective of homogeneity and deficit, this paper presents four “portraits” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of individual multilingual international students which offer an emic and balanced account of the students’ experiences of sociocultural adjustment. To enrich the understanding and presentation of the students’ experiences, this paper employs a visual methodology of photography (Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019). The guiding question of this investigation is: How do multilingual international students understand and visually represent their sociocultural adjustment? This paper begins with a discussion of sociocultural adjustment for international students in higher education and proceeds to explain the impact of ideologies rooted in monolingualism and native-speakerism on multilingual international students’ experiences. The findings are presented as “portraits” and subsequently discussed in relation to the literature.

2 Understanding the sociocultural adjustment of international students

International student adjustment is complex and multidimensional. Schartner and Young (2016) have proposed that adjustment for international students occurs on three levels: the academic, psychological, and the sociocultural. Since this study is concerned with international students’ experiences of adjustment within the broader community—that is, not simply within the host academic institution—the sociocultural domain of adjustment becomes the focus herein.

For Schartner and Young (2016), sociocultural adjustment is defined as “cognitive and behavioural factors associated with effective performance in the host country, such as the ability to ‘fit in’ and interact successfully with others” (p. 374). According to the same authors, adjustment leads to adaptation, which may be considered the outcomes of the process of adjustment. Schartner and Young (2016) also emphasise that adjustment can be examined particularly through qualitative inquiry.

Numerous factors are known to influence the sociocultural adjustment of international students. For multilingual international students who speak English as an additional language, language proficiency emerges as a significant factor (Sawir et al., 2012). However, language proficiency tends to be examined primarily in connection with academic adjustment. In the context of English-medium higher education, higher levels of proficiency in English are generally linked to faster academic adjustment and greater academic success (Kukatlapalli et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2016). Schartner and Young (2016) identify language proficiency as “crucial to academic success” (p. 378). Although there is often an assumption that language proficiency works discretely in relation to academic adjustment and success (Tavares, 2021b), research illustrates the dynamic interplay of several factors when academic adjustment is the area of concern (Phakiti et al., 2013).

Social interaction and support contribute meaningfully to how international students adjust within the community. Hendrickson et al. (2010) found that international students with more social connections with local individuals feel “higher levels of satisfaction, contentment, and significantly lower levels of homesickness” (p. 290). Indeed, Arthur (2017) has argued that social contact with local students in particular plays a critical role in “reducing feelings of loneliness and homesickness and increasing a sense of satisfaction with the international experience” (p. 891). However, international and local student interactions tend to be rather superficial (Tavares, 2021c). This is because both groups assign divergent meanings to new friendships based on their institutional positions: international students are considered new in the host country, while many local students already have social networks in place developed through previous socialisation (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017).

In fact, the attitudes of locals, whether students or otherwise, cannot be underestimated in any investigation of international student adjustment. The positioning of the local culture and language as the “better” or “more correct” ones results in international students being marginalised within the community (Anderson, 2019; Arthur, 2017). The ways international students behave, speak, dress, and observe their cultural traditions in general, such as their ethnic celebrations, can be met with explicit or covert discrimination (Heng, 2016). Lee and Rice (2007) used the term neo-racism to explain how cultural and linguistic ideologies shape the discriminatory attitudes of the host community toward international students. Of course, racism still exists; however, neo-racism operates by appealing to notions of superiority between languages as well as cultures. Neo-racist attitudes expect international students, especially racialised international students from the global south, to give up their languages and cultures in order to fit in. Lee and Rice (2007) clarify:

Discrimination becomes, seemingly, justified by cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone and can thus disarm the fight against racism by appealing to ‘natural’ tendencies to preserve group cultural identity – in this case the dominant group. Underlying neo-racism are notions of cultural or national superiority

and an increasing rationale for marginalizing or assimilating groups in a globalizing world. Neo-racism does *not* replace biological racism but rather masks it by encouraging exclusion based on the cultural attributes or national origin of the oppressed. (p. 389, italics in original)

Needless to say, experiences of discrimination directly impact international students' sociocultural adjustment. International students are criticised when they remain within their ethnolinguistic groups for supposedly "failing" to integrate with locals (Leask, 2009; Trice, 2004). However, such failure-oriented perspectives neglect the importance of *intercultural* contact and mutual exchange, maintaining therefore a one-way flow of transmission in which international students are expected to assimilate to the host culture. When the local culture favours monoculturalism, despite discourses of diversity, claims such as Arkoudis and Baik's (2014) that "understandably, it seems that for the most part, students *prefer* to stay within familiar cultural and language groups" (p. 48, emphasis added) do not critically take into account international students' real desires for and interests in forming meaningful, long-lasting friendships with locals and the hierarchy of cultures that assigns different values to the cultural other (Tavares, 2021d).

3 The legacy of monolingualism and native-speakerism

Multilingual international students' sociocultural experiences are also circumscribed by ideologies of monolingualism and native-speakerism. Multilingual international students who speak English as an additional language and study in English-medium institutions of higher education are considered "non-native speakers" or "ESL speakers" by the host community. Being a non-native speaker is construed as a disadvantage and evokes strong images of deficit and inadequacy for the L2 speaker (Slavkov et al., 2021). The construct of the native speaker reflects a Chomskyan view of languages as discrete linguistic codes that are acquired sequentially (Ortega, 2011). The native speaker of English is someone considered both culturally and intellectually superior from having acquired English from birth (Dewaele, 2018). Multilingual international students' language proficiency in the English language is then always scrutinised against that of the native speaker.

As mentioned previously, language proficiency is tied to sociocultural adjustment. In this sense, the higher the level of proficiency, the easier the experience of adjustment (Sawir et al., 2012). However, despite the level of proficiency, it is the stereotypes of deficit attached to speaking English as an additional language that remain detrimental to an international student's sociocultural adjustment. The identity of the multilingual speaker tends to be one of inferiority in the eyes of the host community. For instance, Motha (2006) found that being a multilingual student who spoke English as an additional language in an American community was conflated to an identity lacking "toughness and independence" and needing handholding from educators, but the same was not true for "monolingual" native speakers (p. 87). Other labels imposed on multilingual speakers in educational and social environments may be of passivity, fragility, and uncritical thinking (Fell & Lukianova, 2015; Tavares, 2021e; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020).

Such issues that affect multilingual international students' identity have partially originated from what some have called the monolingual bias in (second)

language education. In the early days of the field, being multilingual was viewed as not having acquired full competence in the additional language(s); consequently, the multilingual speaker was “less than” monolinguals because their proficiency was always assumed to be incomplete (Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019). Over time, issues of legitimacy have expanded and permeated from the linguistic to all other domains of lived experience, essentialising the deficit view associated with multilingualism onto the L2 learner. As a result, other abilities, skills, and positions that reflect the whole multilingual individual have been neglected and undervalued. To subvert some of these issues, a perspective of asset, rather than deficit, has been adopted more recently (Galante et al., 2019).

Additionally, a focus on agency has contributed to challenging the discourses of deficit encircling multilingual international students. Tran and Vu (2018) have argued that international students’ agency is “revealed through how they [international students] think they are expected to respond... and how they personally want to respond” to the challenges, threats, and conflicts around them (p. 168). The construct of agency must therefore be understood in context. Silence, for example, which was thought to simply indicate insufficient language proficiency on the part of multilingual international students, may also be seen now as a form of agency. However, the legacy of native-speakerism has been such that, as Shapiro and MacDonald (2017) have identified, discourses of deficit not only prevail, but can still also “render invisible the forms of agency that are central to a student’s sense of identity” (p. 80). More agency-oriented research is still needed.

4 Research design

To explore multilingual international students’ experiences, this study was designed through the lens of portraiture. As a qualitative approach, pioneered by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), portraiture follows an ethnographic orientation, considering lived experiences and subjective meanings within the boundaries of their cultural contexts. However, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) have established, portraiture is concerned primarily with finding and documenting goodness and success. The approach does not neglect challenge, but simultaneously does not make it its priority. Additionally, portraiture is known for its bridging of art and science. This means that the approach follows rigorous standards of qualitative research in the social sciences; yet, it presents findings that are interweaved in textual depictions of the aesthetic. The goal of this ethnographic feature is to not only present a more representative portrayal of the research setting and its participants, but also to potentially connect with an audience (within and) beyond the scholarly one. As Quigley et al. (2015) have explained, portraiture “guides the construction of a story and then relates the story to its wider contexts in society and culture” (p. 22). Situated primarily in education, portraiture has informed a range of empirical work, including on arts curricula (Power & Klopper, 2011), student-teacher interactions from a critical race theory perspective (Chapman, 2005), and leadership development in higher education (Raffoul et al., 2020).

The students were invited into the study following ethics approval by the target institution’s research board. The university, pseudonymised as Palm University hereafter, was a large and research-oriented university recognised locally and nationally for its multicultural profile. Located in southern Ontario,

Canada, Palm University hosted approximately 6,000 international students at the time of the study, with more than 150 countries represented on campus through the international student population. Four students, whose information is presented in Table 1 below, were admitted into the study on the basis of being an international student and a multilingual speaker for whom English is an additional language. Four students were included in the study as this number allowed the researcher to focus on each participant's experience in detail (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Four participants were also adequate considering the research question as well as the (extensive) amount of data (Leavy, 2017). The participants' experiences presented in this study are not intended to be representative of the entire multilingual international student experience at Palm University, but are meant instead to foster a rich understanding of the sociocultural adjustment of four individual students. All personal information has been pseudonymised to ensure participant privacy. The languages presented were identified by the participants according to their perceived level of proficiency.

Table 1. Information on participants.

Participant (pseudonym)	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Program of study	Time at Pond at time of study	Multilingual repertoire
Claire	France	19	Female	BA in International studies	4 months	French, English, Spanish, German, Latin
Pablo	Colombia	22	Male	BA in Criminology	3 and a half years	Spanish, English, Portuguese, French, ASL
Sabrina	Brazil	31	Female	Master of Business Administration (MBA)	4 months	Portuguese, English, French, Italian, Spanish
Seth	Macau, China	24	Male	BA in Linguistics	4 months	Cantonese, English, Mandarin, Japanese

4.1 Data collection: Interviews and photographs

Both interviews and photographs provided access to the participants' conceptions of their lived experiences. Interviews were semi-structured in nature to allow for flexibility in terms of what topics would be covered. As Richards (2009) has pointed out, by interviewing through such a method, the researcher remains "prepared to allow the interview to develop in unexpected directions where these open up important new areas" (p. 186). The interviews sought to explore participants' perceptions and experiences in relation to academics (e.g., workload, peer interaction, teaching and learning methods), language learning, social life (e.g., friendships, participation in events and activities

on and off-campus), and psychological experiences (e.g., the emotions the students experienced in response to the situations they encountered). Four interviews were recorded with each participant. On average, each interview lasted one hour. Interviews were the primary source of data considering their instrumental role in allowing me and the participants to elaborate on pre-selected and emergent topics throughout our conversations. Accordingly, photographs played a secondary role as complementing interview-based data. In total, data were collected for a period of five months.

Photographs have long been associated with qualitative research methods and methodologies. The use of photographs in research continues to flourish today (Byrne et al., 2016). Photographs have been commonly employed as an elicitation tool in order to foster discussion between researcher and participant or as a collection tool, through which researcher and participant can visually document and represent the phenomenon under study (Epstein et al., 2006). Over the last two decades, with the increased popularity of mobile phones and improved quality of mobile cameras, researchers have drawn on photographs provided by participants to gain insight into participants' lived experiences. Allen (2012) defined participatory photography as "a visual method in which research participants are encouraged to visually document their social landscapes through photography" (p. 443).

Leavy (2017) argued that participatory photography can be a participatory and inclusive research practice. She explained that asking participants to create or share data in the form of photographs can invite the participants to be co-researchers as they collect data on their own, which can be used in different phases of a research study. Furthermore, Leavy (2017) proposed that this experience can be empowering for the participants as they are in control of deciding what and how experiences are documented and revealed to the researcher. Participant-driven photography provides the researcher an opportunity to visualise, and therefore understand, something from a different personal perspective and from one or multiple modalities (e.g., visual rather strictly textual).

Photographs were included in this study for two reasons. First, to help illustrate the experiences of sociocultural adjustment of multilingual international students beyond a purely textual representation as in excerpts from transcribed interviews. However, and second, for those experiences which would be documented through photographs, the goal was to document them from the perspective of the experiencer rather than my own. This choice was aimed at enhancing participant engagement in the research experience through participatory photography (Leavy, 2017).

The participants were instructed to document their lives as multilingual international students through photographs. The guidelines directed the participants to use their cameras to record experiences which they believed could help depict aspects of their experiences, such as events, activities, places, or things. In other words, the participants were not given too much direction so as to avoid imposing what might have been construed as important or correct to document (Allen, 2012). The purpose was to illustrate some of the participants' experiences of sociocultural adjustment in order to complement the accounts of their experiences originating from the interview data (Umino & Benson, 2019). The participants were asked to share at least one photograph with the researcher weekly.

One major concern in using participatory photography is that of maintaining anonymity (Leavy, 2017). Photographs showing participant faces may compromise

the participant's right to privacy and to remain unidentified once the photographs are included in published material. Only photographs that met the requirement of presenting things and places, but not people, were accepted for publication. While this may have limited participants' freedom to self-express, my ethical commitment to maintaining participant confidentiality and anonymity was non-negotiable. In the end, an average of 16 photos was shared by each participant.

4.2 Data analysis

In analysing the interview data, themes that related to the broader category of adjustment were considered. As a prominent approach in qualitative research, thematic analysis "allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meaning and experiences" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). To begin with, interviews were transcribed and read multiple times in order to gain a deep understanding of their content. Subsequently, the data was coded descriptively line by line directly on the interview documents through comments and highlights with the common codes being organised into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012) in a separate document. Themes were elaborated upon in order to identify "what is unique and specific about each theme" (p. 66). Themes were considered within each participant "profile" as well as across profiles in light of the guiding research question. Representative accounts by participants are presented verbatim, along with rich descriptions of participants' experiences, so as to contribute to establishing trustworthiness of the findings (Loh, 2013). Triangulation of data was also employed (see below).

To analyse the photographs provided by the participants, a visual semiotic approach was employed. Van Leeuwen (2004) explained that this approach is concerned with "two fundamental questions: the question of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the 'hidden meanings' of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?)" (p. 92). Since photographs were used to visually represent and understand human experience, a semiotic analysis was employed to explore not only what a particular image depicted, but also what possible meanings it conveyed. A visual semiotic analysis follows two steps to extract meaning from an image. According to van Leeuwen (2004), meaning is covered in layers:

The key idea is the layering of meaning. The first layer is the layer of *denotation*, of 'what, or who, is being depicted here?'. The second layer is the layer of *connotation*, of 'what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?' (p. 94, italics in original)

Denotation is considered a more straightforward part of the process: photographs denote what is directly in front of the camera (van Leeuwen, 2004). In the process of denoting visual representation, van Leeuwen (2004) called for an attention to the context in which the representation is situated. On one hand, the context may be singular: the author has one message to convey; on the other, the context may be plural: the author encourages multiple and subjective interpretations, which is often the case with abstract imagery. To understand the context, van Leeuwen (2004) proposed some "pointers" that should be taken into account for analysis: categorisation, group vs. individual, distancing, and surrounding text.

Following denotation, the researcher analyses an image at the level of connotation. This part of the process involves examining the values, ideas, and concepts of what the person, thing, or place means or “are signs of” (van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 96). Connotative meanings can be broad, encompassing a collection of values under one single representation, and can be ideological, naturalising the status-quo when the representation is taken as an objective capture of “the way things are” rather than as one out of many constructions of that which is represented. Thus, a photograph can be suggestive of something without overly saying it. The way an image is styled is also indicative of meaning. Considering aspects such as light, focus, shadow, distance, framing, and colour can help uncover and understand meaning. These aspects may be present in the act of taking or editing an image by the participant.

Photographs were included in the study on the basis of their degree of connection to the major themes emergent in the analysis of interview data. In this sense, analyses of interviews and photographs were triangulated, which Thurmond (2001) defined as “the combination of two or more data sources, investigators, methodologic approaches, theoretical perspectives or analytical methods within the same study” (p. 253). Triangulating the data and analysis can lead to diverse and innovative perspectives from which to view the phenomenon under consideration (Thurmond, 2001). Another factor of concern when selecting photographs was quality. When the resolution, colour, clearness, and size of a photograph supplied by a participant compromised its use, the photograph was excluded from the paper, though it was still used for analysis.

5 Students’ experiences

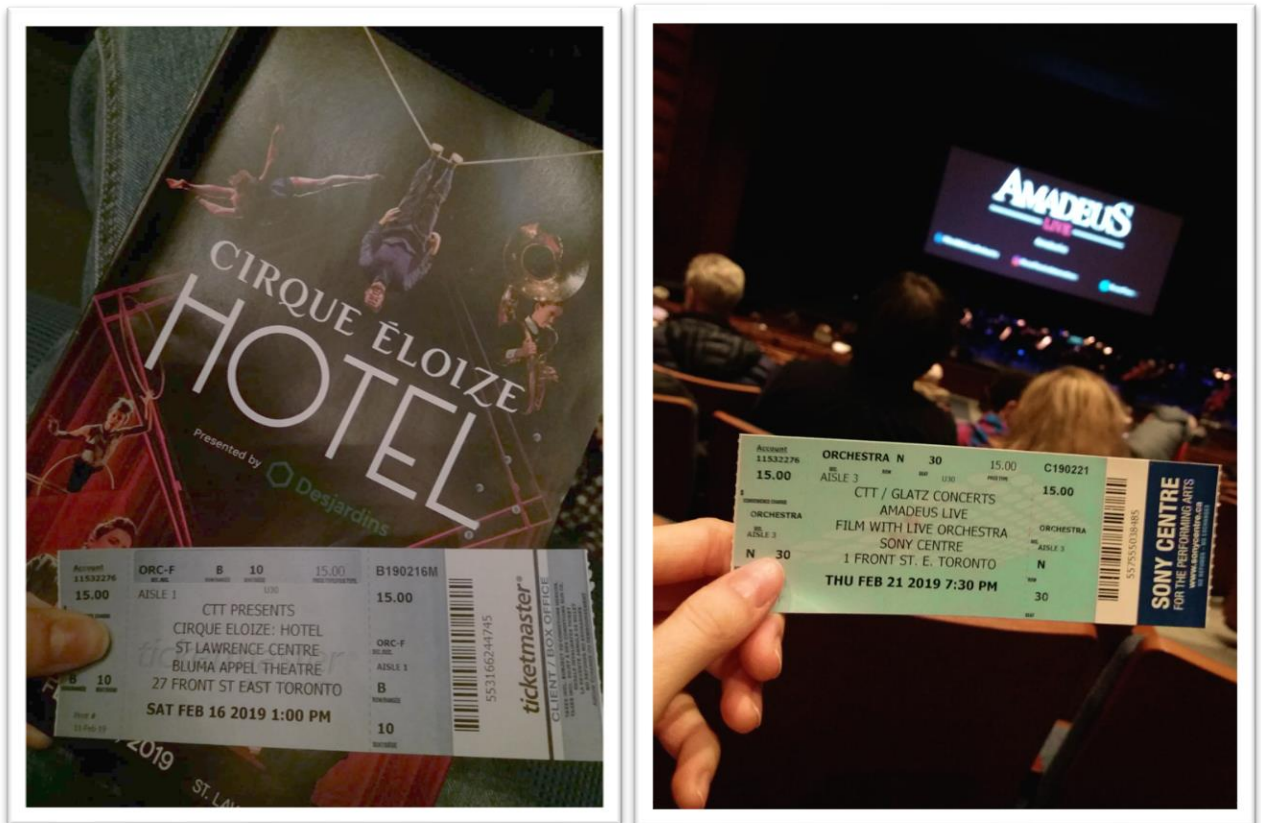
The students’ experiences are presented below in four individual portraits. The portraits contain quotes from interviews and photographs supplied by the participants. Each portrait is introduced with a title representing the key theme of each participant’s overall experience of sociocultural adjustment. These titles were developed out of the analysis of data. Common themes are discussed in the next section.

5.1 *Claire: Hoping for more*

Although Claire arrived at Palm University in September, her desire to be part of the new community emerged weeks prior to her arrival. The official confirmation of her acceptance to begin her studies in the fall led her to the internet, where she spent hours (re)searching enthusiastically for potential social activities, student clubs, and local organisations around Palm University which she could join and contribute to as an incoming member. Claire was passionate about the arts and politics. As such, she hoped to engage with likeminded peers to meet her social and intellectual needs. As a multilingual student who spoke English as an additional language, she approached the opportunity to study at Palm as something incomparable considering that English was the medium of instruction. Consequently, in addition to her expectations in the social and intellectual domains, she also hoped to improve and enhance her proficiency in the English language during her stay at Palm.

For much of her first month at the university, however, Claire’s experiences fell short of what she expected. She had joined Palm’s smaller campus, located in a suburban area, that attracted largely local students. Many of her local peers

were Anglophone or bilingual speakers of French and English who ascribed little to no importance to engaging in social interaction with the impetus of improving their proficiency in English. Additionally, the vast majority of her peers lived off campus. Claire, on the other hand, both studied and lived on campus—an experience which oftentimes evoked feelings of isolation and boredom. Yet, the initial unmet expectations did not stop her from resorting to the broader community. She looked to cultural events to enhance her proficiency in English in context, while simultaneously immersing herself in artistic experiences. In her time off from studying, Claire visited art galleries, theatres, the cinema, and attended performances by the circus and the orchestra that occasionally came to town (see Figures 1a and 1b by Claire).



Figures 1a and 1b. Immersing in cultural experiences.

The passing of time positively changed the social landscape of Claire’s journey at Palm, although not significantly. The fall season decorated the campus while Claire’s social circle had expanded as a result of her prolonged familiarity with the local community. Social interaction with multicultural peers became a site where Claire could continuously learn about unfamiliar or underexplored topics of discussion. Even though such interactions would not always evolve into the kind of friendship she expected—genuine, long-lasting, and spontaneous—the exchange of knowledge they afforded Claire equipped her to better understand the world around her. One area which she enjoyed learning about was religion. Claire had been raised under a Catholic tradition; however, she found that French people were particularly uncomfortable to engage in conversations that centred on that topic. She explained the potential behind the diverse interactions she had by highlighting what she learned:

I met a lot of different people with different beliefs and I think it's very interesting, especially international students [at Palm]. This year I met a girl who is a Jew, and I have never before really spoken with someone who is involved in the Jew community. So, she taught me a lot and she's very open, and also speaks about more extremist Jews. Also last year, I met someone who was a Jehovah Witness, so yes, it was also very different to speak with people [of different backgrounds].

When the first year at Palm came to an end, Claire felt as though the experience had not completely met her expectations. She appreciated the opportunity to study in a primarily English-medium environment and to challenge herself to grow by living somewhere new. She believed that her English had improved by virtue of her time at the university. However, in terms of social interaction, she had spent much of her time by herself (see Figure 2, by Claire). The small campus, located in a residential area and disconnected from major points of interest in the city, contributed considerably to how often she could socialise naturalistically with others, and consequently, to her overall feeling of satisfaction as a multilingual international student. Volunteering in the community and participating in research projects helped her meet some of her needs. Nevertheless, these were structured and infrequent events for specific purposes. In retrospect, she disclosed that she was not prepared for such loneliness.



Figure 2. Experiencing solitude.

5.2 Pablo: From the campus and beyond

By the time I met Pablo, he had been a student at Palm University for three and a half years. He had therefore lived through a great number of experiences both on and off campus. Among other international students at the university, Pablo was informally considered a kind of leader, thanks to his outgoing, friendly personality and to his initiative in bringing international students together. Despite the busy life of being a full-time student, Pablo's social life thrived as he befriended other multilingual international students on campus. Palm University's large and

dynamic campus presented exciting opportunities for students to create and engage in social activities, ranging from pubs and restaurants to the open spaces surrounded by the nature that vividly reflected the seasonal changes.

Living on campus for almost four years made Pablo's academic life considerably easier. The well-equipped library, the proximity of his residence to the classroom buildings, and the overall scholastic environment enabled him to attend to his academic needs by removing some of the barriers associated with living off-campus. The campus held primarily a social meaning for Pablo. Palm's campus was the place where he made friends and developed his social network. His social experiences extended beyond campus when he and his friends would venture downtown to experience much of what the city had to offer as one of the most multicultural in Canada. Sharing meals with friends he met at Palm University in the city's ethnic restaurants fostered a feeling of community and togetherness (see Figure 3, by Pablo).

I feel like you make friends, you feel like you are *always* with someone. Because everyone, like, my classmates, I think I told you, all of my [Canadian] classmates they don't make any friends, they just come to school and they go back home. That's it. So... it's really fun, the campus at night, it's really fun.



Figure 3. Sharing an Asian meal with friends.

From Pablo's perspective, multilingual international students were more risk-taking in terms of initiating new friendships. Based on his observations and efforts, such openness contrasted sharply with the orientation of local students, who remained mostly within their existing social circles and, moreover, spent significantly less time on campus by returning home immediately after lectures.

His conversations with local students also revealed a misperception that international students were quiet, inexperienced, and even unsuccessful because of their foreignised linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the community. However, Pablo's journey challenged the very perception of fragility he encountered in his interactions with local peers. He commented:

They think that we [international students] just stay in our dorms all day. That, like, we don't know how to do things and be successful just because we're not from here.

Palm's campus was the nucleus around which Pablo's social activities revolved. The importance of campus to the maintenance of his social life was such that he refused to move out of the student residence after finishing his first year of studies. For him, the campus blurred the lines between the academic and the social. Yet, his experiences also transcended the boundaries of campus into the broader community, culminating in feelings of enjoyment and belonging. In the summer, among many other adventures, he and his friends sailed through Lake Ontario and explored the city's parks and forests with the same "insider" knowledge that seemingly only locals could have (see Figure 4, by Pablo). Through curiosity and agency, Pablo's successful adjustment challenged the dichotomy that equated "outsider" with experiences of lack. He summarised:

I'm grateful for living the campus experience. Like, I live here on campus and I've lived here since first year. And I remember people used to tell me, like, in second year you're gonna move out and I said yeah, we'll see. But I actually love it. I love the experience of living on campus. I feel like, I don't know if that counts as an experience but my friends, like, the fact all my friends are from everywhere in the world that I got to meet them here, that's like, I'm really grateful for that, I'm happy about that.



Figure 4. Navigating familiar waters.

5.3 Sabrina: From foreigner to local

Sabrina came to Canada following the completion of her undergraduate degree in journalism at a Brazilian university. In the first few months after her arrival, she

attended a private ESL school to improve her fluency in English. While living in Brazil, Sabrina had studied French for several years, considering it her second language because of not only the linguistic knowledge she had developed through intensive study, but also the “charming personality” she ascribed to the language. Speaking French was something she enjoyed in light of her emotional connection to the language. Conversely, she viewed English as a more “objective” language, and while she had also studied it on a part-time basis, she never came to develop the same kind of fondness for the language which she felt for French. The choice to study ESL in Canada was grounded in her desire to attain more proficiency and thus improve her communication with local English speakers.

During her time at the ESL school, Sabrina befriended many multilingual international students. These new friendships were experienced within and outside the classroom, leading Sabrina to new locations in the city through excursions programmed by the school as well as by herself and her peers (see Figure 5, by Sabrina). At the same time, the increased time in Canada fostered an unexpected sense of independence in her (see Figure 6, by Sabrina). After she left the school permanently, she continued to explore her surroundings and diversify her repertoire of experience (see Figure 7, by Sabrina). By the time she decided to apply to study at Palm University, she was feeling strongly prepared to embark on a more challenging journey. Despite the feeling of preparedness, she could not completely repel the image of the native speaker as the better speaker of English. While such an impression did not stop her from growing socially, she still believed that others saw her inferiorly due to her (non-native) proficiency in English.

It was actually nice being a student with other internationals, because everyone was at the same language level, like nobody spoke completely correct but it was that feeling of not being judged. Because Canadians, even today, always diffuse that kind of intimidation because they speak so well, natives speak so well, so automatically that intimidates you and you get stuck. You think twice before you start speaking.



Figure 5. Visiting the Christmas Market downtown.



Figure 6. Reinventing the winter season.

At Palm University, the fear of unperforming linguistically diverted Sabrina to invest less in potentially novel social experiences. She appreciated the cultural diversity of her program, and more broadly, of Palm's community. She felt excited to be part of an intellectually stimulating group and to discover mutual professional interests between herself and her new peers. However, she put her social life aside in order to focus on meeting the linguistic and academic expectations of her courses. Indeed, she found the academic register of English initially challenging to learn. While Sabrina acutely understood the downside of backgrounding her social needs, she no longer felt as though she was new to Canada and needed to develop new social connections. Her previous experience as an international student at the ESL school, along with other opportunities she encountered through part-time work she had undertaken, afforded her ample familiarity with her surroundings and a sense of belonging in the local community.

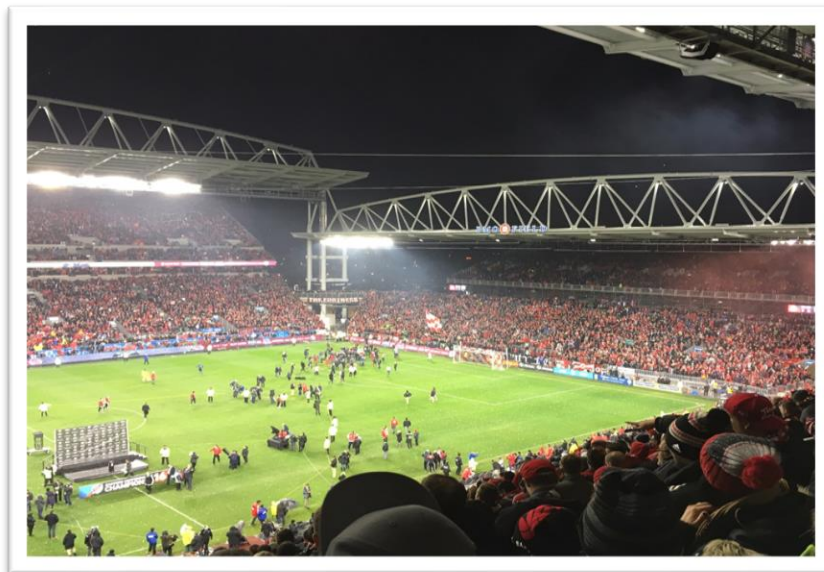


Figure 7. Blending in.

5.4 Seth: A social regression

Seth's sociocultural adjustment encompassed experiences in multiple locations. To begin with, he left Macau as a teenager to attend high school at a small school in New York state. The linguistic and academic unpreparedness with which Seth arrived in the United States rendered the first year of high school an arduous and unsatisfying experience for him. Following the end of high school, he parted ways with life on the east coast and started over in California. The admission into college was behind his move to the west coast—a place where, in stark contrast to his time in New York, he enjoyed a socially fulfilling life as new friendships sprang out through opportunities sustained by the mostly sunny and warm weather year-round. Seth's interest in expanding his college diploma into a university degree later led him to Ontario.

Much to Seth's disappointment, Canada was not what he had expected. He characterised Canada and Canadians as "boring" and "reticent," which quickly evoked in him the past memories of his sojourn in New York. Seth found that locals were not generally interested in new friendships. The brief and structured interactions he had with locals felt incompatible with his social needs based on his gregarious personality, especially since his time in California had consisted of meaningful socialisation with local and international peers. When winter replaced fall, bringing the cold temperatures and the blurring snowfalls, Seth's stance on the city was that it was depressing. As a consequence, he grew to dislike it and fantasised about returning to California, where he felt his sense of self was and would be most alive again. He described his view of the city by juxtaposing it with one portrayed in a Hollywood movie (see Figure 8, by Seth):

The whole [Canadian city] is gray. I was talking about with a friend. The architecture design in [Canadian city] is very dull and depressing, yeah. Have you ever seen movie called [movie name]? It portrayed the city as depressed. That's what I found it is. How the director see[s] about the city, it's very similar to what I see about the city.



Figure 8. Seeing the city through a gloomy filter.

Seth appreciated the opportunity to live in the new Canadian city for it afforded him the chance to enhance his proficiency in English. He was passionate about the language, particularly about opportunities to learn slang and idiomatic expressions, which he believed helped him more easily connect with locals whenever the conversational opportunity emerged. Nevertheless, the lack of meaningful friendships gradually reached the point of having a significant impact on his experiences of sociocultural adjustment. He never refrained from exploring the space and recording it with his professional camera. However, his feelings of isolation and loneliness only augmented as time passed by, which led him to grow increasingly dissatisfied. He had become friends with a couple of his student peers at Palm, but found it challenging to further develop these friendships after classes and off campus.

During his time in Canada, Seth worked part-time at a Japanese restaurant. The job evolved from being a source of income to a source of social interaction in the absence of a stable social network. It was for this reason that he looked forward to going to work after classes. He communicated with his colleagues in multiple languages, such as English, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Japanese, and satisfied his avid interest in Japanese culture that had previously taken him on a visit to Japan. When spring arrived, the local scenery gained much of its colourful life back. Still, Seth continued to remember the city for its gray and cold weather as well as the impact the long winter had on his attempts to expand his circle of friends (see Figure 9, by Seth). The spring season also brought closure to the academic term. Seth had one more term to complete before he could graduate. He hoped eagerly that he could return to California for a graduate degree following his graduation and, in doing so, part ways with Canada.



Figure 9. Social and physical distance.

6 Findings

This paper sought to understand the experiences of sociocultural adjustment of four multilingual international students at a university in Canada. The guiding

question focused on how the students experienced their adjustment within the broader community in which their university was embedded, inclusive of experiences both on and off campus. As the findings demonstrate, the students' experiences of adjustment were complex and unique. All four students were interested in becoming a part of their new communities. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the ways in which the social and cultural environments affected the students' attempts to adjust. As Arthur (2017) has proposed, the community plays a critical role in creating opportunities for multilingual international students to feel included, and by extension, succeed in their new environments.

Although to varying degrees, all four students experienced a kind of uninterest and incuriosity on the part of local students in regard to social interaction. As such, the students attempted to meet their social needs around inclusion and belonging by resorting to other options. These included participating in research studies, attending events by themselves, and investing time into social connections in the workplace. Despite this availability, such experiences could not truly fulfill the students' needs. Multilingual international students hope to form friendships with local students for such experiences present the potential to meet many of their needs simultaneously, even if such friendships consist of "weak" ties (Walsworth et al., 2021). Indeed, the more the students engaged in social interaction, the more they experienced a sense of connectedness and satisfaction. This finding is reflected similarly across Pablo's and Sabrina's experiences.

The opposite was also true: little or no social interaction was tied to a sense of dissatisfaction and estrangement. The lack of consistent social interaction impacted Claire's and Seth's experiences more strongly by fuelling the development of feelings of loneliness and depression. While both students made individual attempts to improve this particular aspect of their experiences, the unfavourable outcomes appeared to be connected to the fact that local students begin their academic studies with pre-existing and strong social ties (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Having an already established social network may translate into local students finding little value in forming new (cross-cultural) friendships and in spending time on campus. Although Pablo and Sabrina felt more satisfied as a result of their social interactions, these were also had primarily with other multilingual international students.

Another common theme related to the influence of the sociocultural and physical contexts of Palm University's campuses. Claire's unfulfilling experiences were exacerbated by the location of Palm's smaller, bilingual campus, where social activity was already compromised given the campus size, location, and the infrequent presence of local students. However, the main campus was also experienced primarily as uninviting, despite its large size and student population—except in the case of Pablo who resided on campus and was therefore in direct contact with other (multilingual international) students on a daily basis. From a practical point of view, multilingual international students living on suburban and small campuses, as was the case with Claire, require more guidance from their universities when it comes to their experiences of sociocultural adjustment. Calder et al. (2016) argued that universities need to provide international students with more support with finding and evaluating adequate housing, both on and off campus, based on the students' needs as newcomers.

Experiences which the students considered representative of sociocultural adjustment varied in nature and meaning. As the pictures illustrate, these experiences included attending cultural and social events organised by the broader community, such as plays, sport matches, and holiday markets. Events initiated by the students themselves were also a part of their journey of adjustment, such as in going out to restaurants, when social bonds could be strengthened more informally. On the other hand, Claire and Seth also documented moments which offer a depiction of what challenges around adjustment may look like. A visual representation of the students' feelings of loneliness, despondency, and isolation may also be found in their personal choices of what to capture in their photos: an empty bench, the gray winter, and physical distance between places and people. Despite all challenges, all four students demonstrated contextual levels of agency and worked to change the course of their trajectories, including participating in research studies, in order to potentially meet some of their social and linguistic needs. The extent to which agency may actually change the outcomes of international students' experiences is indeed largely tied to institutional and sociocultural support available (Tran & Vu, 2018).

From the students' perspectives, their proficiency in the English language was not a significant factor to their sociocultural adjustment. However, the internalised expectation to sound like a native speaker led Sabrina, in particular, to de-prioritise her social needs in order to invest almost unilaterally in improving her language proficiency during her time at Palm. Prior to joining the university, she had already been aware of her marked proficiency from not speaking English "perfectly" (i.e., like a native-speaker). As Zacharias (2019) has termed it, the "ghost of native-speakerism" creates insecurity and doubt in speakers of English as an additional language. Sabrina felt safe in the presence of her multilingual peers at the ESL school. On the other hand, she felt judged when in interaction with native-speaker Canadians because they spoke "so well." Sabrina's experiences were enveloped in ideologies of monolingualism and native-speakerism which perpetuated the hierarchy of languages and cultures (Slavkov et al., 2021). The end result was that she believed that she needed to prove herself to her interlocutors in the environment of Palm University.

7 Conclusion

Given the importance of social interaction for positive sociocultural adjustment, institutions of higher education need to do more for international students. The findings from this study help confirm the unparalleled value multilingual international students ascribe to opportunities to socialise with local students (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Findings also point to the fact that multilingual international students are active and agentive individuals in their attempts to meet their social needs by resorting to other opportunities. However, such opportunities are not always sufficiently meaningful or available within the community. Consequently, it is necessary that institutions of higher education develop structured opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and socialisation beyond the curriculum (Ammigan, 2019). In fact, both multilingual international and local students tend to view such initiatives largely as the responsibility of their academic communities (Tavares, 2021a).

The academic classroom is the primary space in which international and local students meet on a regular basis. As such, instructors can play an important role in multilingual international students' experiences of sociocultural adjustment by developing pedagogical opportunities which bring students from the two groups together. Considering the novelty of the academic experience for some multilingual international students, Zhou et al. (2017) have argued that instructors "need to facilitate a diverse learning environment where international learners can communicate with domestic students as well as fellow students" (p. 230). However, such changes need to stem from an inclusive pedagogy so that the knowledges, experiences, and needs of multilingual international students are not just superficially acknowledged. When diversity is acknowledged, but local knowledge is the only one rewarded, local students may not find any incentive to initiate and cultivate interaction with multilingual international students.

While the findings cannot be generalised, they highlight the importance of social support for multilingual international students. As student mobility continues to intensify, it is imperative that institutions of higher education take a more ethical approach to internationalisation. One that moves away from increasing the presence of international students on campus for the purposes of enhancing competition and generating revenue to one in which the students' experiences of adjustment are prioritised and mechanisms of support improved. In a time when social interaction in higher education becomes increasingly more mediated by technology as a result of the health crisis, the need for adequate support focused on the integration of multilingual international students cannot be underestimated. For multilingual international students, positive sociocultural adjustment is tied not only to better academic performance, but also psychological well-being and satisfaction with their experiences in the new environment.

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