Research Article

© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 12, Issue 2 (2022), pp. 444-466
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
doi: 10.32674/jis.v12i2.2351
ojed.org/jis

The Role of Language and Culture in Postgraduate International Students' Academic Adjustment and Academic Success: Qualitative Insights From Malaysia

Jasvir Kaur Nachatar Singh
Department of Management and Marketing, La Trobe Business School, La Trobe University, Australia

Gavin Jack
Department of Management, Monash Business School, Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

How do language and culture pose adjustment challenges that hinder the academic success of postgraduate international students? This article answers this question based on a thematic analysis of 55 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with postgraduate international students and academic and professional staff members at a Malaysian research-intensive public university. The results show that language and culture are influential in a range of academic (language, supervision, research training) and social (group work, friendship) adjustment challenges. The analysis highlights how these challenges hinder academic success as a result of limited or frustrated pathways for students' linguacultural development. We conclude that future academic research and university policy to support postgraduate international students may pay greater attention to cross-cultural, linguistic, and linguacultural issues.

Keywords: academic success, adjustment, culture, international students, language, linguaculture, Malaysia, postgraduate

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of language and culture in the adjustment issues that have an impact on the academic success of postgraduate international students. International students seek education abroad to gain better quality education, achieve academic success, develop career prospects, and enhance employability skills (Sam et al., 2013). Along their international education journey, international students face academic and social challenges that can impede realization of these goals, especially as they adjust to their new environments. International students' linguistic proficiency in a second/foreign language and cultural differences in an unfamiliar environment are prime amongst these challenges. To date, the majority of studies that highlight such difficulties are conducted in English-language education settings in the Global North and often on Asian students' adjustment to new academic and cultural environments (Andrade, 2006; Wolf & Phung, 2019; Xiong & Zhou, 2018). While a growing body of work about international students moving between locations in the Global South highlight similar dynamics (for example, international students in China and their adjustments: Nadeem et al., 2015; Tian and Lu, 2018), studies on the experiences of non-English-speaking postgraduate international students taught in English in Malaysia are limited (Shafaei & Abd Razak, 2016; Talebloo & Baki, 2013).

Malaysia presents a distinctive context in light of its colonial history, multiethnic and multilingual society, and growth as a regional hub for international education. English is the language of instruction in Malaysian universities that welcome international students, even though the national language is Bahasa Malaysia. Given the colonial histories of many nations in the Global South that are the source of many international students in Malaysia, qualitative study of the experiences of non-English-speaking postgraduate international students may help to shed new insights into issues of adjustment and academic success. Theoretically, the article draws upon the concept of linguaculture (Risager, 2020) to problematize the manner in which the literature separates language and culture into two discrete pillars of analysis, overlooking their interconnection. Using this concept to interpret the results of this qualitative interview study, we develop insights that can be generalized analytically beyond the specific Malaysian context.

The article begins with a selective literature review to guide the research question and the theoretical framework. Research design and methods follow. The discussion interprets the significance of the findings through the lens of the theoretical frame and notes the study's limitations and directions for future research. The theoretical contribution highlights how the academic and social challenges identified in the findings can hinder academic success as a result of limited or frustrated pathways for students' linguacultural development. The article provides implications for policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students experience a range of challenges in their chosen overseas educational institution (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017). In regard to academic success in Malaysian universities, Sam et al. (2013) and Singh as well as Jack (2018) revealed that postgraduate international students from countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East perceive academic success as a composite of attainment of overseas tertiary-level qualifications, timely study completion, employment upon graduation, developing research and transferable skills, experiencing international life, and contribution to their home country. Studies have shown that achievement of academic success is influenced by a range of factors related to students' adjustment to new academic and cultural environments (Ren & Hagedorn, 2012; Singh, 2018). Commonly reported types of adjustment-related challenge faced include academic (Trahar, 2014), social (Kim, 2019) and physiological/ psychological (Li et al., 2014) factors. Cross-cultural differences and linguistic issues are key factors (Xiong & Zhou, 2018; Yassin et al., 2020).

Most research to date about international students is predicated on Western settings (Nadeem et al., 2015; Singh & Jack, 2018), although studies from non-Western settings are growing, especially on international students' adjustment in China (Tian & Lu, 2018). A predominant focus has been placed on international students from diverse cultural backgrounds whose first language is not English undertaking study at academic institutions in the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. A common impediment to international students' adjustment in such contexts is lack of English proficiency (Sherry et al., 2010). Brown's (2008) ethnographic study of postgraduate international students from non-English-speaking countries, for example, found that they face problems when they communicate (in writing and orally) in English in both academic and social settings in the United Kingdom. A majority felt disadvantaged by having poor English skills, despite scoring well in their IELTS examination. Brown further discovered problems such as "insufficient comprehension of lectures, seminar discussion and day-to-day conversation; limited fluency, grasp of grammar and vocabulary" (p. 77) that affected academic adjustment and outcomes. Participants reported these problems restricted their participation in the classroom, resulting in poor reading and writing skills. In a study of Asian students in New Zealand, similar linguistic challenges were associated with non-timely completion of assignments, thesis chapters, exams, and tests (Campbell & Li, 2008); in another, they had a negative impact on the experience of postgraduate supervision (Li et al., 2010). As for social adjustment, international doctoral students from Korea in the United States in Kim's (2007) study highlighted how mistakes in wording their sentences and improper grammar usage frustrated them in expressing their ideas in English with friends. Language limitations also interfered with their daily conversations in their social space.

Providing a counter-balance to the Western dominance of the literature, a nascent body of Malaysian studies offers insights into international students' adjustment experiences that also encompass cultural and linguistic issues. Studies to date have explored, for example, international students' general challenges

related to facilities, social environment, academic systems and international office programs (Talebloo & Baki, 2013), and psychological and socio-cultural adaptations in Malaysia (Shafaei & Abd Razak, 2016). One stream of work in Malaysia notes how international students experience friendship barriers with local students (Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011), caused by communication gaps. Although Malay students were polite and friendly, they spoke the national language among themselves and international students felt ignored and isolated (Singh, 2018). Another stream of Malaysian studies focuses on supervision challenges. Here postgraduate international students from Arabic-speaking countries have reported negative experiences due to English language barriers (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010), which impacted their academic writing abilities and communication with supervisors. Differences in academic culture are also known to play a major role in supervisory relationships: students from some countries are taught to state their opinions and ideas directly and assertively rather than indirectly in discussions (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010). These differences in cultural communicative preferences can result in offensive or unpleasant relationship outcomes for both parties. In a Malaysian study, Sidhu et al. (2014) found that strained supervisory relationships were experienced by students due to supervisors' lack of research methodology knowledge and personality clashes between students and supervisors. These students reported feeling demoralized, fearful of their supervisors, and lacking confidence to complete research projects on time. A high attrition rate and non-timely completion of PhD studies is evident among PhD students in Malaysia (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009), attributable to such problematic supervisory relations.

In sum, language and culture have been shown to play a significant role in international students' adjustment and academic success across a range of Western and non-Western settings. While this article addresses the need for more study about international students (especially from the Global South), it also tackles a conceptual shortcoming in Western and non-Western literature. The current literature separates language and culture into two discrete pillars, highlighting how students encounter *either* cross-cultural differences (e.g., culturally distinct preferences in communication style) *or* linguistic issues (e.g., difficulties writing in English). Such a division overlooks how language and culture are interconnected human phenomena, as established by scholars in linguistic anthropology (Agar, 1994). We therefore turn to Risager's (2006, 2020) concept of 'linguaculture' and Astin's (1993) 'I-E-O' model as part of the theoretical framework to instead explore how the interface of language and culture influences postgraduate international students' experience of academic and social adjustments and thereby shapes their academic success.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model provided a starting point. It posits that academic success is a function of the interaction between a set of students and environment-specific factors. Input could include characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution such as race, high

aspirations, and past educational experiences. Environment is described as "the various programs, policies, faculty, peers and educational experiences to which the student is exposed" (p. 7). Outcome or output refers to students' academic achievement in terms of grades, degree completion, critical thinking, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors after exposure to the environment element. The model indicates that the individual student who takes part in the environment or educational experience tends to have an impact on their own development and outcomes (Astin, 1976).

Risager's (2006, 2020) writing on the concept of 'linguaculture'—"a domain of experience that fuses and intermingles the vocabulary, many semantic aspects of grammar, and verbal aspects of culture" (Friedrich, 1989, p. 306, quoted by Risager, 2020)—offered a framework for analyzing the mutually imbricated nature of language and culture. She identified three inter-related dimensions of linguaculture:

- constancy and variability in the semantics (relating to the meaning of words independent of context) and pragmatics (meaning in relation to context) of individual languages and language use, including how discourses circulate meanings beyond specific languages;
- the poetics of language (e.g., rhythms or puns as authors play with the form and content of language); and
- the identity dimension of language, related to social and personal variations in language use, which shows that language is never a neutral phenomenon. For example, English has considerable symbolic power as *lingua franca* in the hierarchy of global languages produced by imperial histories (Sharifian & Sadeghpour, 2020).

Linguaculture is part of the linguistic resources of an individual, and, according to Risager, will vary depending on whether the language a person (the student) is using is their first, second, or a foreign language (for purposes of written or oral communication). Individuals develop and have an intimate relationship with their linguaculture in their first/native language. They will draw upon that linguaculture when learning (or using) a foreign language and transfer associated cultural and social experiences from the mother tongue into this new linguistic and cultural realm.

According to Risager, the task for the language learner (or international student using a foreign language) was

> to establish an association between his/her *new* language and his/her life experiences and cultural knowledge, and this task has to be accomplished on the basis of a growing understanding of some of the life experiences and cultural knowledge common among first language speakers. (2020, p. 117)

When externalized through writing or speaking, an individual's linguaculture shows their communicative intentions and exhibits a high degree of semantic and pragmatic variabilities. Readers/listeners in turn interpret these intentions/texts

through their own linguaculture. We use this framework to answer the research question: *How do language and culture pose adjustment challenges that hinder the academic success of postgraduate international students?*

METHOD

Research Design and Setting

This article is part of a wider study into international students' understanding of academic success. It adopts an interpretive methodology underpinned by hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990), which "addresses experience from the perspectives of meanings, understandings and interpretations" (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1056). It is appropriate for this study, given the interests in language and culture, and how postgraduate international students make sense, and thus meaning, of the lived experiences that arise from their adjustment to a new academic environment. It also aligns with qualitative emphasis on studying phenomena of interest from the viewpoint of research participants, and with due regard to context (Tracy, 2020).

Malaysia as a setting for this study is a key part of the research design and sampling. It is in the Global South, whose universities have growing numbers of international postgraduate students whose first language is not English but who are taught in English. Malaysia is a student hub (Knight, 2014) based on the exponential growth of international students in recent years (Ministry of Education [ME], 2019).

The Federation of Malaya gained political independence from Britain in 1957 (Lee, 2004) and became Malaysia in 1963. As of 2020, its population was 32.7 million; its multiethnic and multilingual society is 69.6% Bumiputra (Malay ethnicity), 22.6% Chinese, 6.8% Indians, and 1.0% other ethnicities (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DSM], 2020). Bahasa Melayu is the official language and widely used by Malaysians in verbal and written communication. English is the second language, but it is the medium of instruction at Malaysian higher learning institutions. This is the contemporary linguistic context of Malaysian universities in the neoliberal international education space where English is the lingua franca.

PARTICIPANTS

The study is based on qualitative interviews with 55 participants all based at a Malaysian research-intensive public university: 33 postgraduate international students (IS), 12 professional staff (PS), and 10 academic staff (AS). Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to identify and recruit participants, including professional staff providing academic and non-academic support services to students (rarely covered in international student research). We deployed snowball sampling where research participants accepted for participation were then invited to suggest the names of other students who might be interested in participating (Minichiello et al., 2008). The study was conducted with institutional ethics approval (74/11PG) and confidentiality and anonymity of

all participants and the university itself were assured. The majority of the student participants were from Iran, India, Iraq, Yemen, Indonesia, and China, and thus representative of the countries that dominate the postgraduate international student profile. Because the majority of such students are enrolled in popular courses in pharmacy, education, communication, architecture, and humanities, the majority of participants are drawn from these courses, as illustrated in Table 1. There were in total 33 postgraduate students interviewed in this study.

Table 1: Postgraduate International Students (IS)

Information		Number
Gender	Male	21
	Female	12
Total		**33**
Nationality	India	4
	Iraq	4
	Iran	4
	Yemen	3
	Nigeria	3
	China	3
	Indonesia	3
	Sri Lanka	2
	Pakistan	2
	Cambodia	1
	Bangladesh	1
	Somalia	1
Faculty	Pharmacy	5
	Education	5
	Communication	4
	Humanities	3
	Computer Science	3

Information		Number
	Architecture	3
	Biology	2
	Management	2
	Language	2
	Industrial Technology	1
	Physics	1
	Mathematics	1
	Business	1
	PhD	23
	Masters	10
	0–11 months	8
	1st year	10
	2nd year	4
Degree	3rd year	5
	4th year	3
Length of Candidature	5th year	1
	Graduated	2

Professional and academic staff came from a number of areas and Faculties. Table 2 shows academic staff members demographic details. There were in total 10 academic staff members interviewed for this study.

Table 2: Academic Staff (AS)

Information		Number
Gender	Male	7
	Female	3
Position	Dean	2
	Deputy Dean for Graduate Study	1
	Deputy Dean for Postgraduate and Research	2
	Senior Lecturer	2
	Language Instructor	1
	Language Coordinator	1
	Lecturer	1
Male	Professor	2
	Associate Professor	5
Female	Professor	1
	Language Teachers	2

A total of 12 professional staff participated from the Postgraduate Student Office, language support services, the library, and housing administration and faculties that offer academic assistance to postgraduate international students. Table 3 presents their demographic details.

Table 3: Professional Staff (PS)

Information		Number
Gender	Female	8
	Male	4
Position	Deputy Registrar	1
	Assistant Registrar	3
	Senior Assistant Registrar	1

Information		Number
	Residential Manager	2
	Librarian	3
	Statistical Administrator	1
	Editing Advisor	1
Department	Postgraduate Student Office	6
	Library	3
	Hostel	2
	Faculty	1

PROCEDURES

Semi-structured interviews were utilized. They are the most common method of data collection in qualitative and phenomenological research to obtain, understand, unfold, and explore in-depth the experiential views of participants (Kvale, 2007). The first author conducted face-to-face interviews over a three-month period. All interviews (except with one professional staff member who spoke in Malay) were conducted in English, audio-recorded (with participants' permission) and transcribed. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 mins and the average length was 49 mins. The interview schedule for the wider study included questions about participant demographics, interviewees' understanding and experiences of academic success, factors and challenges that affect it, and how the university supports it. The first author was the interview facilitator to whom participants could reveal their perspectives and experiences of academic success. This required consistent effort on her behalf to avoid moving too fast in the interview and imposing preconceived thoughts on the phenomena under investigation (Green & Bowden, 2009).

ANALYSIS

Van Manen's (1990) method of thematic analysis was used to code the data. The first author adopted an inductive approach to first manually analyse, code, and generate a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process began with selecting the shortest transcript from each participant group and separately assigning key words or phrases that describe what the meaning the participants wished to convey about their experiences (Tesch, 1990). Van Manen's (1990) selective reading approach was adopted to see which phrases represent the phenomena under investigation. The first author asked "What statement(s) or phrases(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described" to formulate meanings (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). The

next step was to group similar sub-codes and redundant codes; this reduced the list to a smaller and more manageable number of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tesch, 1990). The first author highlighted quotes which supported the codes (Creswell, 2008; Tesch, 1990). As the coding process progressed and themes emerged, the analysis became more structured and organized (Ezzy, 2002). Reduction of codes then led to establishment of themes, and interpretation of data in relation to the research question.

RESULTS

The two main sets of adjustment-related challenges reported by participants as impacting their academic success were academic and social challenges. Figure 1 presents the thematic map of these and is used to structure the findings.

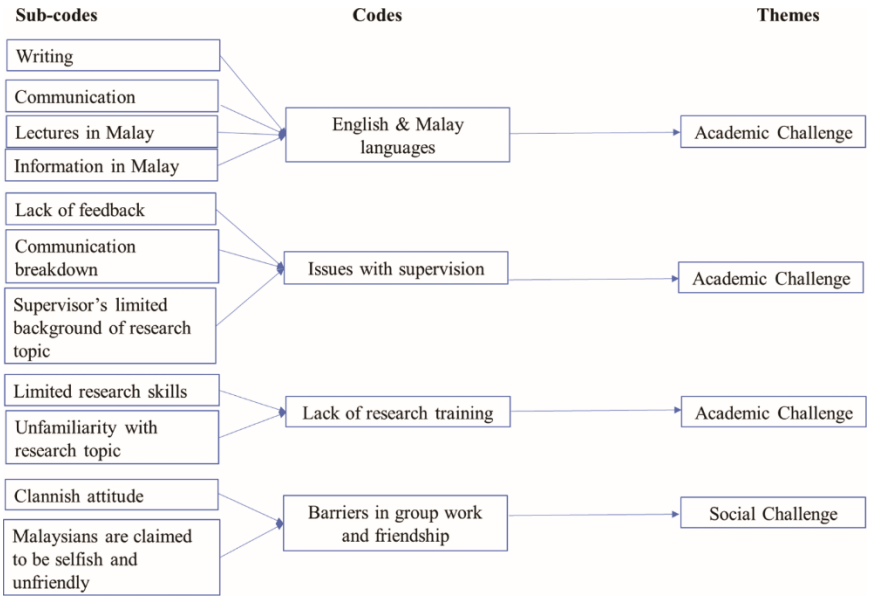

Figure 1: Thematic Structure

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

English and Malay Language Challenges

English proficiency was perceived as a barrier to academic success. Students specifically reported issues with grammar and sentence structure in their communications in English, similar to Novera's (2004) finding. Academic staff also found that some students from Middle Eastern countries (first language Arabic) tend to have problems with the way they write Roman alphabets. Although these students have their IELTS/TOEFL scores as an admission

requirement, there are issues when they translate Arabic words into English. Arabic has a 28-letter alphabet (all consonants), whereas English alphabet has 26 letters, including vowels. Arabic letters take on different shapes depending on whether they are the initial, medial, or final (Auty et al., 1993). As a result, students are confused when writing the Roman alphabet if they have limited writing experience in English:

> They come from a background where they have been trained to follow the wrong structure, and some of them have problems with their writing of the alphabet also *(AS 7, Female, Language Instructor)*.

In regard to sentence structure, an editor explained that Middle Eastern students with Arabic as native tongue struggle with English grammar and using conversational language, as opposed to academic style language, which leads to mistakes:

> These students, especially from Arab countries, they have a tendency to write long sentences without full stops, and then, of course, the grammatical problems. They have the knowledge, but if you cannot express yourself properly, it is difficult to carry yourself at the international level *(PS 7, Male, Editor)*.

International students also reported the tendency to think in their mother tongue first before translating their ideas into English and writing in English:

> I had a slight problem with changing the language. My problem was not really with my English but having a thought in my mind in Persian, but to write in English was not so easy. I couldn't find the best word to write. Sometimes I just translated them and it was not a good translation *(IS 10, Female, Iran).*

Such practical difficulties can certainly have an impact on the quality of students' written work and articulation of ideas. This may hinder students' academic success in terms of non-timely study completion because they can take a longer time to complete assignments or theses (Mori, 2000). A student pointed out that he faced challenges in writing his PhD thesis:

> I still have a lot to go because thesis writing is very tough. However, I am planning within six months I will finish it *(IS 18, Male, Bangladesh)*.

A Master's student argued that thesis or assignment writing is a very difficult task as you need to perfect your writing in English, and this requires many drafts and redrafts, and a lot of time: "If we are unable to write to some academic standards, we are unable to receive good grades for our assignments" (IS 29, Male, Yemen), and

> English is our second language; so, when you write your assignment or thesis, this is a very difficult task. You need to write ten times over anything you write and rewrite, but you don't have the enough time to do it, especially in the course work, as you have limited time to do your

> assignment and if you don't do your assignments neatly you don't have good marks at the end.

Academic staff associated communication challenges mainly with the *viva-voce* or oral examination. The *viva-voce* is a mandatory requirement for postgraduate students to defend their Master's or doctoral research project at Malaysian universities. According to staff, international students were sometimes unable to understand basic questions posed by panel members. In an extreme case, international students might experience academic failure due to their lack of English language competency. A Deputy Dean pointed out that international students tend to experience problems in their *viva-voce*:

> When it comes to the viva, who will talk on behalf of them, how would you defend yourself? So, there are students who couldn't do that. They fail maybe *(AS 6, Male, Deputy Dean)*.

He added: *'We have seen many students who couldn't cope or were demotivated because of the language barrier.'*

Students in this study had not only experienced difficulties in English. They also faced challenges in communicating in Bahasa Melayu, particularly if they themselves were Indonesians. They are, however, permitted to write their theses in Bahasa Melayu due to its linguistic similarities with Bahasa Indonesia. Thus, while the medium of instruction is English, some flexibility is applied in the case of Indonesian students to allow them to write either in English or in Bahasa Melayu, but, according to academics, even with this choice, Indonesian students tend to write their thesis in Bahasa Indonesia, which is not one of the two approved languages:

> The Indonesian students, they feel that it is easy here, because we have the common language, yet the language is still a problem for Indonesians, because you have to write in the Malay language, not the Indonesian language. Indonesian students write in the Indonesian language. It is better to ask them to write in English, because certain words are simply vulgar: the meaning is different *(AS 6, Male, Deputy Dean)*.

The structure of sentences and some specific words do not convey accurate definitions in both languages. As a result, academic staff members tend to edit and revise students' writing style. This may contribute to non-timely completion and poorly written quality of theses and publications. A PhD student commented: *'It is not just getting PhD within the time frame but completing with quality' (IS 30, Male, Nigeria)*.

Further, international students acknowledged that they faced problems in lectures and tutorials, because lecturers unconsciously or habitually used Malay to teach or to convey information, which impacted students' learning processes and led to feelings of exclusion:

> The lecturer will give a lecture in the Malay language. There is a tutorial for two hours in Bahasa. There are only a few sentences in English and

> most, 90%, in Bahasa. Some slides were in English, so I can read them, but the lecture is mixed English and Bahasa in the teaching *(IS 7, Male, Somalia)*.

Similar findings emerged in a Korean study (Kim, 2019), which reported that Korean was used in classrooms and had great influence on international students' academic socialization in class.

A Palestinian Master's student claimed that she faced difficulties in catching up on course materials due to the mixed languages used by lecturers:

> Lecturers use Bahasa and English during the class, so I face some difficulties in this case, as it is difficult for international students to understand, to get the idea [behind it] *(IS 19, Female, Palestine)*.

Newly arrived international students reported facing issues understanding information in Malay on campus noticeboards. Lack of understanding of Malay affected their academic success, because they were unable to comprehend vital information such as timetables or non-academic activities that could help them excel:

> I read the notice board, I read banners, but all of them are in Malay. Every poster, every word is in Malay, and that sometimes irritates me. I find it very difficult, because I am yet to register in the Malay [language class] *(IS 25, Female, Pakistan)*.

> If it is written in English and Malay, we can learn. All is written in Bahasa. Even if we try to search it is difficult, and, in the timetable, it might be written in Bahasa *(IS 7, Male, Somalia)*.

Malay language classes are offered to international students, and it is a requirement for all international students to pass in Malay before they graduate. It is recommended that international students take these classes in their first semester to assist them in their learning and social environment.

Issues With Supervision

Previous scholars have linked lack of supervision to differences or conflicts between supervisors and students in terms of cultural misunderstanding, lack of day-to-day contact, inadequate critical supervision that offers analysis and evaluation of work in progress, and time management (Abiddin & West, 2007; Krauss & Ismail, 2010). The findings here echo these themes, with students citing disorganized meeting appointments, feedback that lacks specificity or focus, and supervisor availability (because supervisors may have too many postgraduate students and they themselves may hold multiple leadership roles. Such issues were barriers to effective supervision:

> My supervisor is very busy and when I pass my chapters to her, she needs a lot of time to read and give feedback to me. So that's the big challenge for me. She has a lot of students, so she is extremely busy with them too.

> She is also a Deputy Dean and also at the same time she needs to travel a lot. She doesn't have a lot of time to correct so many students' work and at the same time she is a lecturer *(IS 6, Female, Indonesia)*.

Due to the university's status, academic staff members have experienced increases in their workload in recent years. The ratio of graduate students to supervisors has increased, high-impact research needs to be conducted, and additional administrative work is required, coupled with increased teaching workload. Limited supervisor expertise in students' research topics was also an issue:

> Sometimes you feel your supervisor is disconnected from your field or on what you are going to do or what you are thinking. You feel you didn't make progress or fail in making progress. This is the main measure that makes me feel depressed *(IS 8, Male, Palestine)*.

Some students were prompted to take the extreme measure of changing their supervisors:

> We notice now that the conflicts between the international students and the supervisor are increasing. For example, they always ask to change their supervisor, because they are having problems with their supervisor in terms of interaction, communication, human relations – I think because of the different backgrounds and different cultures *(PS 3, Female, Assistant Registrar)*.

While the government's Internationalisation Policy document (Ministry of Higher Education [MHE], 2011) states that universities are responsible for providing positive learning experiences to international students, these supervision challenges undermine students' engagement and experience. Notably, no students raised any concerns in regard to their supervisors' English proficiency during supervision.

Lack of Research Training

International students from Arab and Asian countries acknowledge that they have insufficient research knowledge due to their limited research experience in their previous education systems. For example, a Yemeni student observed that research was never a part of his undergraduate or Master's degrees in Yemen:

> I did my Bachelor and Master's degrees in my [home] country. So the academic challenge first [in the new country] was I didn't have the knowledge about doing research, the steps that should be done for preparing proposals, how to deal with databases, trying to analyse the articles you read, what are the things that you should read – is it articles only or books? *(IS 4, Male, Yemen)*.

Another student from Cambodia mentioned that only document analysis was primarily used for research in his home country. He, therefore, faced difficulties

in understanding research methods in Malaysia, especially in initial years of candidature:

> Research method in my country is different. During the French time, there was only a focus on reading documents and then we can compile and analyse the documents. So here I need to conduct interviews. It is different. My background is law, so I changed to study education. This [new study field] was so different, and [hence] difficult for me *(IS 15, Male, Cambodia)*.

Limited awareness of research culture was reported as impeding their research growth in terms of preparing a research proposal, reading and analyzing articles and books, conducting research, and writing thesis-related chapters. While Ismail and Abiddin (2009) claimed that issues of unfamiliarity with research topics and lack of research methodology knowledge are normal experiences faced by postgraduate international students, at this university this affected students' academic success in terms of timely completion: it took longer to start projects and completion tended to exceed the official timeframe:

> I should find the topic, the area and the gaps. It was very difficult to find the topic: I read for a year and a half, and I want to start to do it, but I don't find what to do, then I change the topic, I change the topic, [and] after a year and half I change the topic again. 'What is the objective you want to do, what is your contribution?' The topic is quite difficult for me *(IS 13, Male, Yemen)*.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Barriers in Group Work and Friendship

International students faced barriers in group work with Malaysian students, which impacted their friendship. This study found negative perceptions on Malaysian students' personal characteristics. For example, local students were labelled selfish, for example, in not sharing research information, they were seen as unfriendly and limited discussion around stimulating ideas in group assignments. Group work issues impacted formation of friendships with domestic students, and in consequence international students were sometimes unable to complete their assignments:

> The way to study, to do group assignments, for us is really different with them. They start to do something, then they don't share with you. And then, whenever we ask them to explain to us what they are doing, they don't do anything. [That's the] end of the assignment, because we don't have any discussion. That's why we've got problems with the assignment, we cannot finish sometimes, also, the relationship between us and the Malaysian students. They don't explain. They just expect you do all the things *(IS 17, Female, Iraq)*.

Malaysians are also considered to have a 'clannish' attitude. This is because they only make friends with the same race groups, according to student participants:

> In my country we don't have races. There was difficulty in trying to make friendship and communicate with Malaysians, with all races. We can say that Indians, they are friends with Indians, Malays are friends with Malays, and Chinese, they are friends with Chinese. I think there are barriers between friendship relationships between foreigners and Malaysian students *(IS 4, Male, Yemen)*.

This factor is also identified in Trahar (2014), where it is reported as apparent unwillingness of these three local ethnic groups to integrate; this reluctance may 'complicate' the international dimension if there is less integration between Malaysian and international students. Studies have suggested that such 'dis-integration' further impacts postgraduate international students' academic success because they are unable to experience international (Malaysian) life and communication barriers impede research ideas and study discussion (Singh & Jack, 2018). While studies (Nguyen, 2013; Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018) have claimed that international students are unreceptive to befriending local students, however, this study has found the opposite to be the case.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of language and culture in the adjustment issues that have an impact on the academic success of postgraduate international students in a particular university. In terms of Astin's model, the notion of linguaculture provides a novel variable of study that can advance understanding of international students' adjustment. Linguaculture may be viewed as both input (characteristics of the individual student) and linked to particular facets of the institutional environment (e.g., as manifest in the use of English as the official language of classroom instruction) within Astin's model.

The study addresses two limitations in the literature. The first is the need for more studies about international students whose first language is not English, and undertaking postgraduate degrees delivered primarily in English at non-Western institutions. Second, while studies have shown the role of cross-cultural differences and linguistic matters in international student adjustment, they are conceptually limited in not recognizing the interconnected nature of culture and language. Accordingly, we now discuss the results through the conceptual lens of 'linguaculture.'

The results section showed linguistic and cultural issues to be embedded in a series of academic and social adjustment challenges and reported by all participants to be detrimental to academic success. Risager's (2006) concept of linguaculture assisted in analysis as to how the *interface* of language and culture across different dimensions is at work. First, we view some challenges reported as related to the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of linguaculture. Prominent

empirical instances include the academic and support staff reports on weaknesses in Arabic-first-language Middle Eastern students' use of English in written texts, and international students' difficulties expressing themselves verbally in English in oral examinations. Academic staff also criticize Indonesian students' unreflective and problematic use of Bahasa Melayu in thesis writing. It is also evident in students' accounts of their time-consuming cognitive approaches to translating literally from their first language to English before moving to speech or writing.

Second, the ambivalence and frustration of everyday experiences of international students are connected to the pragmatics of language and identity dimensions of linguaculture. Students noted that teachers made inconsistent use of English as the mandated language for classroom work, they posted important notice-board signs in Bahasa Melayu rather than English. There were difficulties, too, in undertaking group work with local Malaysian students and these thwarted opportunities for friendships among students from different backgrounds. Challenges reported by all participants about students' research and methodological knowledge—that is, the particular academic discourse and its domain-specific meanings and practices—transcended the boundaries of particular (national) linguistic and cultural groups. These difficulties played out in students' questioning of their budding academic identities and competencies.

We argue that these semantic, pragmatic, and identity dimensions of linguaculture in the data show that language and culture do matter in postgraduate international students' academic and social adjustment, but they also point to *how* they matter. They matter because they constitute barriers that undermine and frustrate opportunities for postgraduate international students to experience linguacultural development in academic and social settings during overseas study. Whether in classroom settings, feedback on grammar and writing or barriers to group integration, students are thwarted in their attempts to develop associations between their new language and existing life experience or cultural knowledge through "a growing understanding of some of the life experiences and cultural knowledge common among first language speakers" (Risager, 2020, p. 117). As a result, students are unable to access and accumulate the resources needed to fully operate interculturally and cross-linguistically in their new context, and to develop successful academic subjectivities. Such an interpretation does not seek to sideline the role of proficiencies in the English and Bahasa languages, or of cross-cultural differences as important issues in and of themselves. Instead, by considering the human experiential domain that "fuses and intermingles the vocabulary, many semantic aspects of grammar, and verbal aspects of culture" (Friedrich, 1989, p. 306, quoted by Risager, 2020), we offer a novel line of argument that explains how international student adjustment and the students' academic success is linked fundamentally to linguacultural development—to the inextricability of language and culture in the experience of international students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The generalizability of this study is limited contextually, since its findings are based on information gathered from semi-structured interviews from a single public research university in Malaysia. It is also limited to a sample of postgraduate students. Further research could overcome these limits by using a mixed-methods research design from a wider range of public and private educational institutions in Malaysia. It could extend such research to other cultures and language backgrounds. Scholars could also investigate whether the insights presented here are echoed in the experiences of undergraduate international students at similar universities. Future studies could use ethnographic methods to document interactions and teaching and learning challenges faced by international students in lectures and tutorials in real time. We contend that the analytic generalizability of the findings lies in the use of the concept of linguaculture to interpret the results. Future work related to the role played by language and culture in research on the linkages between international student adjustment and academic success will benefit from further deployment of this notion.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the role of language and culture in generating adjustment-related challenges that have an impact on international students' academic success. It is based on a qualitative interview study of postgraduate international students, academic and support staff at a Malaysian public university. The article pushes beyond linguistic deficit or cross-cultural arguments to suggest that postgraduate international students' academic success is a reflection of the extent to which they are given opportunities to engage in linguacultural development in their new educational setting.

The article may have implications for policy and practice in Malaysian universities, first of all, because Malaysia is the country under study and higher education the principal sector. Targeted and specific institutional programs oriented by language and cultural nuances may need to be offered to postgraduate international students. Universities may not only offer English but also Bahasa Melayu programs to support language proficiency and broader cultural understanding. On the student side, it is vital that students participate in any such programs, engage in institutional student orientation and workshops on supervision, and systematically address language and research training. A policy stating that all lecturers and tutors must use English as the medium of instruction in classrooms seems important to ensure inclusivity in the learning and teaching process. Malaysian research policy and supervision practices need to be clearly communicated to postgraduate international students via a Handbook and compulsory workshops. Finally, academic and support staff might be offered regular cross-cultural training, including introduction to the concept of linguaculture.

REFERENCES

Abiddin, N. Z., & West, M. (2007). Effective meeting in graduate research student supervision. *Journal of Social Sciences, 3*(1), 27–35. http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.962230

Agar, M. (1994). *Language shock: Understanding the culture of communication*. William Morrow.

Alsahafi, N., & Shin, S. C. (2017). Factors affecting the academic and cultural adjustment of Saudi international students in Australian universities. *Journal of International Students, 7*(1), 53–72. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i1

Al-Zubaidi, K. O., & Rechards, C. (2010). Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers. *Arab World English Journal, 1*(1), 107–129. http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2777058

Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education, 5*(2), 131–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589

Astin, A. W. (1976). *Academic gamesmanship: Student-oriented change in higher education*. Praeger.

Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college?* Jossey Bass.

Auty, N., Holes, C., & Harris, R. (1993). *Just listen 'n learn Arabic*. McGraw-Hill.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706QP063OA

Brown, L. (2008). Language and anxiety: An ethnographic study of international postgraduate students. *Evaluation & Research in Education, 21*(2), 75–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500790802152167

Campbell, J., & Li, M. (2008). Asian students' voices: An empirical study of Asian students' learning experiences at a New Zealand university. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 12*(4), 375–396. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307299422

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.

Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2020). *Current population estimates, Malaysia, 2020.* https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/pdfPrev&id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09

Ezzy, D. (2002). *Qualitative analysis: Practice and innovation*. Routledge.

Green, P., & Bowden, J. A. (2009). Principles of developmental phenomenography. *Malaysian Journal of Qualitative Research, 2*(2), 55–74.

Ismail, A., & Abiddin, N. Z. (2009). The importance of graduate students' needs on supervisory contribution in a Malaysian public university. *The Social Sciences, 4*(4), 355–365. https://medwelljournals.com/abstract/?doi=sscience.2009.355.365

Kim, J. (2019). International students' intercultural sensitivity in their academic socialisation to a non-English-speaking higher education: A Korean case study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1627298

Kim, Y. (2007). Difficulties in quality doctoral academic advising: Experiences of Korean students. *Journal of Research in International Education, 6*(2), 171–193. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240907078613

Knight, J. (2014). Introduction. In J. Knight (Ed.), *International education hubs: Student, talent, knowledge-innovation models* (pp. 1–12). Springer.

Krauss, S. E., & Ismail, I. A. (2010). PhD students' experiences of thesis supervision in Malaysia: Managing relationships in the midst of institutional change. *The Qualitative Report, 15*(4), 802–822.

Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews.* Sage Publications.

Lee, M. N. N. (2004). *Restructuring higher education in Malaysia* (Vol. Monograph Series No: 4/2004). Universiti Sains Malaysia, School of Educational Studies.

Li, G., Chen, W., & Duanmu, J.-L. (2010). Determinants of international students' academic performance: A comparison between Chinese and other international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 14*(4), 389–405. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309331490

Li, J., Wang, Y., & Xiao, F. (2014). East Asian international students and psychological well-being: A systematic review. *Journal of International Students, 4*(4), 301–313. https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis/article/view/450

Malaklolunthu, S., & Selan, P. S. (2011). Adjustment problems among international students in Malaysian private higher education institutions. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 15*, 833–837. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.03.194

Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., & Hays, T. (2008). *In-depth interviewing: Principles, techniques, analysis* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education Australia.

Ministry of Education (2019). *2018 Higher education statistics*. Kuala Lumpur.

Ministry of Higher Education. (2011). *Internationalisation policy for higher education Malaysia 2011*. Kuala Lumpur.

Mori, S. C. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 78*(2), 137–144. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb02571.x

Nadeem, A., Pratt, C. B., & Bo, S. (2015). Factors in the cross-cultural adaptation of African students in Chinese universities. *Journal of Research in International Education, 14*(2), 98–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240915592107

Nguyen, H. M. (2013). Faculty advisors' experiences with international graduate students. *Journal of International Students, 3*(2), 102–116. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v3i2.504

Novera, I. A. (2004). Indonesian postgraduate students studying in Australia: An examination of their academic, social and cultural experiences. *International Education Journal, 5*(4), 475–487.

Pernecky, T., & Jamal, T. (2010). (Hermeneutic) phenomenology in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research, 37*(4), 1055–1075. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2010.04.002

Risager, K. (2006). *Language and culture: Global flows and local complexity.* Multilingual Matters.

Risager, K. (2020). Linguaculture & transnationality. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication* (2nd ed., pp. 109–123). Routledge.

Ren, J., & Hagedorn, L. S. (2012). International graduate students' academic performance: What are the influencing factors? *Journal of International Students, 2*(2), 135–143. http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/edu_pubs/4

Sam, R., Zain, A. N. M., Jamil, H. B., Souriyavongsa, T., & Quyen, L. T. D. (2013). Academic adjustment issues in Malaysian research university: The case of Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese postgraduate students' experiences. *International Education Studies, 6*(9), 13–22. http://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v6n9p13

Shafaei, A., & Abd Razak, N. (2016). International postgraduate students' cross-cultural adaptation in Malaysia: Antecedents and outcomes. *Research in Higher Education, 57*(6), 739–767. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-015-9404-9

Sharifian, F., & Sadeghpour, M. (2020) World Englishes and intercultural communication. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication* (2nd ed., pp. 299–311). Routledge.

Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Wing, C. H. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education, 60*(1), 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z

Sidhu, G. K., Kaur, S., Fook, C. Y., & Yunus, F. W. (2014). Postgraduate supervision: Comparing student perspectives from Malaysia and the United Kingdom. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 123*, 151–159. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1409

Singh, J. K. N. (2018). What are the factors that contribute to postgraduate international students' academic success? A Malaysian qualitative study. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(5), 1035–1049. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1467383

Singh, J. K. N., & Jack, G. (2018). The benefits of overseas study for international postgraduate students in Malaysia. *Higher Education, 75*(4), 607–624. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0159-4

Talebloo, B., & Baki, R. B. (2013). Challenges faced by international postgraduate students during their first year of studies. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 3*(13), 138–145.

Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. The Falmer Press.

Tian, M., & Lu, G. (2018). Intercultural learning, adaptation, and personal growth: A longitudinal investigation of international student experiences in China. *Frontiers of Education in China, 13*(1), 56–92. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11516-018-0003-3

Tracy, S. (2020). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, creating analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley Blackwell.

Trahar, S. (2014). 'This is Malaysia. You have to follow the custom here': Narratives of the student and academic experience in international higher education in Malaysia. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy, 40*(3), 217–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2014.903023

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Althouse Press/Routledge.

Wolf, D. M., & Phung, L. (2019). Studying in the United States: Language learning challenges, strategies and support services. *Journal of International Students, 9*(1), 211–224. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.273

Xiong, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2018). Understanding East Asian graduate students' socio-cultural and psychological adjustment in a U.S. midwestern university. *Journal of International Students, 8*(2), 769–794. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i2.103

Yassin, A. A., Abdul Razak, N., Qasem, Y. A., & Saeed Mohammed, M. A. (2020). Intercultural learning challenges affecting international students' sustainable learning in Malaysian higher education institutions. *Sustainability, 12*(18), 7490. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12187490

Zhu, Y., & Bresnahan, M. (2018). "They make nocontribution!" versus "We should make friends with them!"—American domestic students' perception of Chinese international students' reticence and face. *Journal of International Students, 8*(4), 1614–1635. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i4.221

Dr JASVIR KAUR NACHATAR SINGH, PhD, is an award-winning Lecturer at the Department of Management, Sport and Tourism, La Trobe Business School, La Trobe University, Australia. Dr Singh's research expertise is in higher education with a particular interest in exploring international students' lived experiences of academic success, employability, career aspirations, and learning experiences in a blended learning environment. Dr Singh also explores lived experiences of international academics with leadership positions. Email: j.nachatarsingh@latrobe.edu.au

Dr GAVIN JACK, PhD, is the inaugural Associate Dean Research Impact and Professor of Management. His multidisciplinary research interests and expertise include workplace diversity and inclusion, postcolonial organization studies, sustainable agricultural development, and qualitative and critical management research methods. He has been a co-chair of the Critical Management Studies Division of the Academy of Management. Email: Gavin.Jack@monash.edu