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Language Challenges and Coping among International Doctoral Students: Perspectives from Students, Staff, and the Institution

Bing Gao
Teaching and Learning Department, University of Iowa, USA
ORCID: 0009-0000-2978-5495

ABSTRACT

This study examines international doctoral students' language challenges during acculturation in the U.S. Specifically, it explores how students described their challenges and coping strategies and how the University and its staff influenced their language experiences. Fourteen students and three staff members from a midwestern U.S. university participated. Data were collected through a Qualtrics survey and semistructured interviews. Using Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality, this study groups students into self-identified English-dominant and less-English-dominant groups. It identifies the distinct language challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ. The findings also show that although university services and staff support facilitated students' language adjustment, limited student engagement with some services revealed structural issues in their organization and implementation. The study concludes with recommendations for improving educational support and offers directions for future research.

Keywords: language challenges, coping strategies, international doctoral students, university staff members, institutional support, higher education in the U.S.

In recent decades, the U.S. has been the top destination for international education (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Advocates for international education have emphasized the important contributions of international students (ISs) in the U.S., including developing intercultural competencies and global perspectives, supporting teaching and research in the sciences, and driving economic growth (Chellaraj et

al., 2008). In the 2023–2024 academic year, approximately 45% of ISs were enrolled in graduate programs, followed by undergraduate programs, optional practical training, and nondegree programs (IIE: Institute of International Education, 2024a). This indicates that a large proportion of ISs pursue master's and doctoral degrees. Notably, between the 2007/2008 and 2023/2024 academic years, the number of international graduate students (IGSs) not only exceeded those in other academic tracks but also increased by approximately 100.7% (IIE, 2024b).

However, the steady growth of ISs in the U.S. has recently been disrupted by new immigration policies and reductions in federal research funding. For example, the number of ISs arriving on visas declined by 28.5% in July 2025 compared with July 2024 (Anderson, 2025), and international enrollment is projected to decrease by as many as 150,000 students in fall 2025 (Unglesbee, 2025). At the same time, federal funding cuts, including a freeze on grant reviews, the elimination of DEI-related programs, and a proposed 15% cap on NIH indirect funding, have tightened university budgets and weakened financial support for graduate students (Gerhard, 2025). As a result, many graduate students, particularly doctoral students, face an uncertain future with increasing frustration and confusion. Although the data collection for this study occurred prior to the implementation of these recent policy and funding changes, the current context underscores the urgency for institutions to provide adequate support for international doctoral students, who face heightened levels of uncertainty and discrimination. This study contributes to the literature by examining international doctoral students' language adjustment during acculturation, which is closely tied to student success (Horne, 2024). It also highlights the role of university staff and services in supporting students' language adjustment, an area rarely explored in existing research.

This study employs Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality, which has been used to examine how multiple identities and systems of power shape individuals' experiences in higher education (Renn & Reason, 2013). Few studies have applied this model to international doctoral students' acculturation, considering perspectives from students, institutions, and staff. The model includes three levels. First, *social categories* shape individuals' social positions and hierarchies (Anthias, 2013). Núñez (2014), for example, applied this level to Latino im/migrant high school students in California, identifying status, ethnicity, citizenship, race, and gender as key factors influencing college access. This study, however, found home country, language, and cultural background to be the most salient categories for international doctoral students in the U.S. These categories were informed by Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) and identified inductively from participants' narratives of self-understanding and positioning in U.S. higher education.

The second level, *multiple arenas of influence*, includes four domains. The *organizational domain* focuses on institutional roles in influencing individuals' access to education and resources. The *representational domain* examines how public and media discourses shape the perceptions of social groups. The *intersubjective domain* emphasizes relationships and interactions between

individuals and members of groups, highlighting the power dynamics within these interactions. The *experiential domain* analyzes how students interpret their experiences within the campus climate. The third level, *historicity*, places social categories and domains in broader temporal and spatial contexts, exploring how economic, social, political, and historical conditions shape opportunities. Núñez (2014) noted that not all levels need to be addressed in a single study. Accordingly, this study focuses on first-level social categories and three second-level domains (i.e., experiential, intersubjective, and organizational) since the data do not reflect historicity. Guided by this model, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How did international doctoral students describe their language challenges during acculturation? (2) What coping strategies did they use? (3) How did the University and staff influence their language experiences?

Several studies have applied Núñez's (2014) model. Hora et al. (2022) used it to explore Latinx students' access to internship opportunities at a Texas border university. They reported that gender, socioeconomic status, race, financial needs, and institutional structures created obstacles that made students feel uncompetitive and limited their career opportunities. Similarly, Cuba et al. (2021) used a model to explore the educational experiences of two Latin English learners in the U.S. They analyzed students' identity markers, including race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, nationality, and language, across three levels: the microlevel (navigating intersecting identities), the meso-level (influences from schools and communities), and the macrolevel (media, public discourses, and systemic factors). They reported that English learners faced systematic barriers that limited access to postsecondary opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acculturation

Acculturation, which originated in anthropology, refers to the change in values, attitudes, and behaviors that occur through interactions between two distinct cultures (Berry, 2005). It has been widely studied among nondominant groups, such as immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and ISs (Leong, 2015; Yakushko, 2010). Schwartz et al. (2010) explained a key distinction among these groups: immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are generally considered permanent residents in their new homeland, and ISs are usually intended to stay for the duration of their studies. This study focuses on the acculturation experiences of international doctoral students in the U.S.

Researchers have reported that acculturation can have positive outcomes, including enhanced adaptation, personal growth, and overall well-being. It can also lead to negative outcomes, such as stress or feelings of alienation (Joiner & Walker, 2002). These negative experiences are commonly referred to as acculturative stress, which arises from the acculturative stressors of cross-cultural adaptation. The following subsection defines acculturative stress and stressors, highlights the stressors faced by IGSs, and discusses their impact.

Acculturative Stress and Acculturative Stressors

Acculturative stress refers to the negative physical and psychological effects of acculturation, including anxiety, depression, and maladaptation (Berry, 2006). Research on IGSs in the U.S. has shown that acculturative stress is common and is often associated with loneliness, social isolation, identity confusion, and homesickness (Han et al., 2017). Compared with acculturative stress, the concept of acculturative stressors lacks a clear definition. Berry et al. (1987) noted that individuals experience acculturation differently, leading to various stressors, among which language challenges are particularly salient for IGSs (Gao & Wesely, 2024). One key language challenge is accent, which is defined as a distinctive way of pronouncing a language (Wolfram, 2000). Studies have shown that IGSs often perceive their own accents as barriers to communication (Morady Moghaddam, 2024; Park et al., 2017) and may struggle with regional accents in the U.K. or Australia (Park, 2016; Vasquez Diaz & Iqbal, 2024). The role of accents also intersects with debates on World Englishes, which acknowledge diverse norms of English pronunciation and usage (Jenkins, 2009). In support of this view, research suggests that foreign accents do not necessarily reduce comprehensibility, as accent and proficiency are not directly correlated (Winke & Gass, 2013).

Research has shown that language challenges negatively influence IGSs' academic performance and sociocultural adaptation. Students with lower English proficiency reported lower academic achievement and greater adjustment difficulties (Zhang & Brunton, 2007), struggling with writing, understanding lectures, taking exams, participating in class, and forming social connections (Banjong, 2015; Trice, 2003). Researchers have also identified a mismatch between international students' language experiences and faculty or staff perceptions. Galloway and Jenkins (2009) reported that university administrators and faculty overestimated the adjustment problems of international students in their early 20 s, particularly those related to English language skills. Similarly, Milojicic's (2019) study revealed that Chinese international undergraduates and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers held divergent expectations about scaffolding, structure, and group work, which may contribute to Chinese international undergraduates' disengagement in ESL contexts. However, existing studies have overlooked the language-related challenges faced by international doctoral students and the perspectives of staff. To address these gaps, this study examines international doctoral students' language experiences during acculturation from both student narratives and staff perspectives.

Coping and International Students' Coping Strategies

Coping with acculturative stressors involves cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals use to manage demands that they perceive as overwhelming (Folkman et al., 1986). Strategies vary depending on how stressors are interpreted, but research shows that IGSs commonly rely on social support, guidance from faculty and staff, and emotion regulation or expression (Schmitt et al., 2003). These approaches are generally classified as problem-focused or emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping refers to actively addressing challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Some ISs seek social support by building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. Support from family, cultural groups, and new friendships can provide emotional expression and a sense of belonging (Taylor, 2011). For example, Cao et al. (2021) reported that Chinese IGSs in Belgium relied on conationals, international peers, and university staff to cope with academic stressors, such as language barriers, academic writing, class participation, and critical thinking.

As international student enrollment increases, faculty members recognize the benefits and responsibilities of supporting ISs. Studies have highlighted the important role of faculty and staff in identifying IGSs' needs, connecting them with resources, and supporting their academic and social adjustment (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). However, gaps remain between supportive faculty attitudes and actual practices. Some faculty hesitate to adapt to instruction and hold deficit views of IGSs' language abilities (Ryan & Viete, 2009; Kingston & Forland, 2008). In addition, institutional barriers, such as staffing shortages, limited funding, and structural constraints, hinder support efforts (Nilsson et al., 2004). Thus, the support of faculty and staff has produced mixed results. This study explores the perspectives of instructors and administrative staff regarding international doctoral students' language experiences during acculturation and their role in supporting them.

Emotion-Focused and Avoidance-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping involves managing emotional distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). ISs often use emotional regulation (e.g., positive thinking and distraction) and emotional discharge, although some scholars classify the latter as avoidance-focused coping, including distraction and social diversion (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). The evidence on the effectiveness of avoidance-focused coping is mixed. Some studies have linked avoidance-focused coping to greater sociocultural adjustment difficulties (McWilliam et al., 2003; Sumer, 2009), whereas others have suggested that strategies such as acceptance or resignation may reduce acculturative stress (Vergara et al., 2010). Previous studies have focused primarily on coping strategies adopted by students, with limited attention given to institutional and staff support. This study addresses this gap by examining how such support influences students' language experiences during acculturation.

METHOD

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a midwestern U.S. university selected for its diverse international student population and its openness to academic research. The University setting enabled access to students and staff across various programs and departments, which facilitated the recruitment of potential participants. In addition, the University offers academic and cultural resources

designed to support ISs, making it an appropriate context for this research. Using an embedded single case design (Yin, 2018), the study examined international doctoral students' acculturation at a midwestern U.S. university through three units of analysis: (1) students' interpretations of their own acculturation, (2) staff members' perceptions and support, and (3) the institutional organization of resources and services.

As the researcher of this qualitative case study, I encouraged participants to share their perspectives, engage in in-depth exploration, and generate rich descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The student participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling. Eligible participants were full-time IGSs who had studied at the U.S. midwestern University for at least six months. A Qualtrics survey distributed via departmental listservs, with the assistance of 15 staff members, yielded 74 responses, 51 of which were valid and were primarily from doctoral students. To ensure consistency, I contacted doctoral students via email only on the basis of their disciplines and the order in which they completed the survey and invited them to participate in interviews. Fourteen agreed to participate. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged (Francis et al., 2010). The demographic information of the student participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Student Participants

Participant	Country of Origin	Native Language	U.S. Stay Duration
Kundai	Zimbabwe	Shona	5+ years
Anushka	India	Marathi	2-5 years
Haoyu	China	Mandarin Chinese	6 months-2 years
Siyan	China	Mandarin Chinese	2-5 years
Jingyi	China	Mandarin Chinese	5+ years
Pari	India	Marathi	5+ years
Yichen	China	Mandarin Chinese	2-5 years
Kamal	Bangladesh	Bengali	5+ years
Viktor	Russia	Russian	6 months-2 years
Ali	Iran	Persian/Farsi	6 months-2 years
Juan	Colombia	Spanish	2-5 years
Yoo-jin	South Korea	Korean	2-5 years
Reza	Iran	Persian/Farsi	6 months-2 years
Yutong	China	Mandarin Chinese	6 months-2 years

Staff participants were purposefully recruited for their professional engagement with ISs, particularly in administrative roles and language instruction. Through professional networks and colleague referrals, all three invited staff agreed to participate. Their instructional and administrative perspectives provided diverse, information-rich data that contributed to the understanding of institutional and staff-level support. During staff interviews, I acknowledged that my status as an international doctoral student might influence our interactions. To mitigate this, I clarified my research role and emphasized my objective of collecting diverse perspectives. I approached the interviews with curiosity and respect to better understand staff views on student experiences and institutional support. Table 2 presents staff participants' affiliations and responsibilities.

Table 2
Demographic Information of Staff Participants

Participant	Affiliations and Responsibilities
Emma	Full-time administration support at College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Olivia	English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor
James	ESL instructor

Data Collection and Analysis

All recruitment and data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Iowa. Data were collected through a Qualtrics survey and semistructured interviews. The 18-item survey gathered student demographic and academic information, self-rated English proficiency (listening, speaking, reading, and writing on a 1–10 scale), confidence in adapting to an English-speaking environment, and language challenges in daily and academic settings. I conducted one-on-one interviews with international doctoral students and university staff. To maintain logical flow, most student interviews were conducted before staff interviews. Each of the 14 students completed a 60-minute interview between March and August 2024, mostly in person on campus, with Zoom as an option. Staff interviews, conducted between April and August 2024, lasted 60–90 minutes in private campus rooms or staff offices. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

After completing the data collection, I primarily analyzed the interview transcripts, using the Qualtrics survey as a supplementary source. This analysis involved three techniques: (1) open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to categorize raw data and identify key concepts and patterns; (2) within-case analysis (Yin, 2018) to examine individual responses in depth and organize them into categories; and (3) cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009) to compare insights across participants and identify similarities, differences, and recurring themes. For example, students who identified themselves as English-dominant were grouped together on the basis of their narratives, which revealed frequent use of English

in their home countries, stronger language backgrounds, and accent-related challenges. In contrast, students who identified themselves as English-less-dominant had fewer opportunities to practice English outside the classroom and seldom identified accents as concerns.

Trustworthiness/Validity

To enhance the validity and trustworthiness of this study, I employed triangulation, reflexivity regarding my positionality, peer debriefing, and member checking. I implemented data source triangulation (Moon, 2019) by collecting and comparing interview data from students and staff, which provided multiple perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. I also maintained an acute awareness of my positionality (Maher & Tetreault, 1993). As an international doctoral student in the U.S., I brought an insider's perspective that informed the interview questions, elicited authentic responses, and enabled nuanced interpretations of emotions, phrases, and cultural references. I also reflected on how my student status might influence staff interactions and clarified my research role to encourage openness. In addition, I used peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by sharing selected journal entries and interview excerpts with my doctoral peers who have experience in qualitative research. They provided alternative viewpoints and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the data. Finally, I conducted member checking (Varpio et al., 2017) by sharing transcripts and preliminary interpretations with staff and students, most of whom provided clarifications or corrections, strengthening the study's credibility.

FINDINGS

This study uses social categories and the experiential domain in Núñez's (2014) model to examine students' language challenges. The relevant categories included the students' home country, language, and cultural background. The survey data revealed students' diverse backgrounds: Kundai from Zimbabwe (native Shona speaker; English as an official language); Anushka and Pari from India (native Marathi speakers; English learned as a first or second language); and the remaining 11 from China, Iran, Russia, Bangladesh, Colombia, and South Korea, where English was learned as a foreign language. Their native languages included Mandarin Chinese, Persian (Farsi), Russian, Bengali, Spanish, and Korean. Students from Zimbabwe and India reported high confidence in their English before arriving in the U.S., whereas the other 11 expressed mixed concerns or optimism.

For analysis, the students were grouped by self-assessed English proficiency and language learning background. Anushka, Kundai, and Pari identified themselves as English-dominant, whereas the remaining 11 identified themselves as English-less-dominant. This grouping was used as an analytical lens rather than a universal classification. The experiential domain was then used to explore how each group interpreted language experiences during acculturation. Three key

challenges emerged: difficulty with accents, struggles in understanding cultural and contextual nuances in language, and emotions/anxiety during communication.

Difficulties with Accents

Although self-identified English-dominant students were confident in their English proficiency, they still faced accent-related challenges in daily and academic settings. Kundai, from Zimbabwe, had studied in the U.S. for eight years, earning bachelor's and master's degrees before beginning his doctorate, yet still struggled with accent-related misunderstandings. He described having to repeat himself in restaurants and classrooms, experiences that made him feel frustrated and reluctant to speak in class: "When I say something, the professor keeps saying, 'What? Pardon?' I keep repeating the answer." Kundai also noted that accent difficulties persisted across institutions and were most pronounced in his first semester, particularly in group social settings where he sometimes "had no idea what they were talking about." Over time, he adapted to different accents and built friendships, emphasizing that effective communication requires mutual effort and greater acceptance of diverse accents.

Both Kundai and Anushka noted that listeners' backgrounds influenced their accent comprehension. Anushka shared, "When I'm talking to people who come from outside of the U.S., they can understand me even though we are not from the same country. However, Americans found it difficult." Although Americans, who are considered to have the highest levels of English proficiency, often struggled with unfamiliar accents, ISs were more adaptable due to frequent exposure to diverse accents. This finding suggests that accents are not indicators of language proficiency but rather that understanding accents depends on exposure and adaptability.

Struggles in Understanding Cultural and Contextual Nuances in Language

This study revealed that spoken language comprehension was influenced not only by accents but also by cultural and contextual nuances in language, such as unfamiliar expressions, slang, and cultural references. Pari, a self-identified English-dominant student, described struggling with informal phrases commonly used in the U.S. She shared, "We were sitting in the class, and American students use certain phrases. Everyone understood the conversation and the context, but I was Google searching." Although she recognized individual words, their contextual meanings were unclear. Pari's experience illustrates that comprehension requires not only understanding words but also grasping cultural and contextual nuances, without which communication becomes difficult.

For students in the self-identified English-less-dominant group, unfamiliar phrases and social norms posed challenges. Jingyi and Haoyu initially misunderstood greetings, such as "How are you?", whereas Yoo-jin interpreted greetings literally and responded in detail. Others, including Kamal, Siyan, and Yichen, struggled with slang, jokes, and cultural references. As Kamal noted, "When I chat with my American lab mates, they use a lot of slang and cultural references that I don't recognize … I struggle to understand them, and sometimes I'm not even sure whether they mean something literally or not." Such

experiences highlight how cultural and linguistic nuances in everyday interactions can hinder comprehension and participation.

Emotions/Anxiety during Communication

Students in the English-less-dominant group reported language challenges shaped by power dynamics, pressure to respond quickly, fear of mistakes, and nervousness, which often lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and self-doubt. Ali and Kamal struggled to express themselves during meetings with primary investigators (PIs). Ali noted that his PI did not give him time to explain, whereas Kamal recalled feeling pressured by the PI's question "Do you understand?", even though he later realized that he understood much of the discussion. These cases suggest that hierarchical relationships can obscure students' actual language abilities, underscoring the need for supportive environments that allow clearer expression.

Fear of mistakes and nervousness also discouraged participation in both academic and social contexts. Yoo-jin hesitates to initiate conversations, saying, "I don't want to say anything incorrectly." Jingyi, on the other hand, struggled with fast-paced interactions, such as ordering food, and often nodded without comprehension to avoid embarrassment. She mentioned, "Sometimes, I have had things in my food that I didn't want, but I felt too ashamed to ask the staff to repeat themselves." Similar difficulties arose in academic settings. Yoo-jin recalled freezing during class discussions. She shared, "I know many things in my head, but when I get nervous, I cannot articulate my knowledge to classmates. I completely blanked out and stopped mid-discussion." This experience underscores how performance anxiety not only restricts participation but also undermines students' ability to demonstrate knowledge, potentially reinforcing feelings of inadequacy. These findings also highlight the need for inclusive learning environments that normalize mistakes, provide more time for responses, and encourage supportive peer and faculty interactions to reduce language-related barriers.

Coping Strategies for Language Challenges

This section uses the experiential domain in Núñez's (2014) model to examine how each group described their strategies for coping with language challenges. The analysis revealed that students primarily adopted problem-focused and avoidance-focused coping. The three self-identified English-dominant students mainly adopted problem-focused coping strategies to address accents and cultural or contextual nuances. For example, Kundai asked for clarification, used online resources to improve accent comprehension, and even encouraged professors to adjust, stating that "understanding accents requires additional effort and training." Pari addressed unfamiliar cultural references by asking questions in class and emphasized self-compassion and support from peers and professors to build her confidence in communication.

Students in the English-less-dominant group used both problem-focused and avoidance-focused coping. Interestingly, they often use problem-focused coping in academic settings. Juan improved his language by observing classmates and

mimicking them. Yoo-jin prepared for class by watching YouTube lectures. She shared, "If I need to explain something in my class, I watch YouTube videos before the class; there are many good lectures." Siyan adopted a focused listening strategy to enhance comprehension during class discussions. She noted, "My strategy is to listen for keywords first because they help me capture important information. If I think it's relevant to me, I'll pay more attention." These strategies helped them address academic language challenges effectively.

However, when addressing language challenges in daily life, students in the English-less-dominant group often adopt avoidance-focused coping, limiting interactions that cause stress. Yoo-jin shared, "I avoid in-person conversation and prefer to chat online or send emails when handling everyday tasks." Similarly, Jingyi shared:

> Sometimes, I prefer not to go to those places [fast-food restaurants] because I always feel frustrated when I try to understand the cashier. I feel stressed when I go grocery shopping and prefer to use self-checkout and not interact with another person.

Both students avoided in-person interactions to reduce anxiety and frustration in daily situations. While this coping strategy provided temporary relief, it limited opportunities for language practice and long-term improvement.

Like avoidance-focused coping, Haoyu and Siyan downplayed their language challenges to reduce emotional stress. Haoyu noted, "I definitely feel anxious, but my strategy is to not let them [language challenges] bother me." Similarly, Siyan noted, "I haven't tried any specific methods to improve my language skills... I'm not too concerned about them [language challenges]." Their tendency to minimize language challenges may have been influenced by the fact that these challenges were more common in daily life than in academic settings. As discussed earlier, students adopted problem-focused coping to manage language challenges in academic contexts. However, in daily life, they tend to avoid face-to-face interactions to reduce anxiety. Ultimately, all four students who employed avoidance strategies reported that their language abilities remained insufficient to address language challenges effectively.

University and Staff Roles in Supporting Students' Language Challenges

This section analyzes the data via the organizational, intersubjective, and experiential domains of Núñez's (2014) model. The organizational domain explores students' engagement with university language support and how the University structures influence students' experiences. This domain is closely linked to the experiential domain, as students' self-reports reflect the influence of these structures. This section also compares staff perspectives and student narratives to analyze how staff-provided services influence students' language experiences.

The University Role

In the organizational domain, the University provided various language resources for ISs, including the Campus Conversation Partners Program, Writing

Centers, and language tutoring through English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. In the experiential domain, the students reported mixed experiences with these resources. Those in the humanities and social sciences generally had positive perceptions of certain resources. For example, Pari found the Campus Conversation Partners Program helpful for connecting with American students, building a social life, and learning about language and culture. Pari, Haoyu, and Siyan also frequently used the Writing Center to improve clarity and word choice in their writing. However, students in engineering, business, and public health rarely use these language services or find them ineffective, likely because of structural issues in how the University organizes and promotes these language resources, which limits their accessibility and impact.

An analysis of students' limited engagement with language resources or their negative experiences revealed three structural issues in how the University designed and implemented them. First, promotion was concentrated in orientation sessions rather than through ongoing communication. For example, Jingyi was aware of the Writing Center because her professors actively encouraged its use, but she missed other language resources, likely because she did not attend the orientation for IGSs. This indicated that a one-time orientation was insufficient to ensure sustained student awareness. Second, even when students were aware of language resources, the University lacked follow-up support. Yoo-jin's experience with the Campus Conversation Partners Program highlighted this gap. She shared, "They matched a student, but the student disappeared, so I couldn't have an opportunity to have a conversation." Without structured follow-up or monitoring, such programs failed to deliver meaningful support. Yoo-jin emphasized that providing services alone did not ensure their effectiveness or meet student needs.

Third, some students reported that their language resources did not align with their needs. For example, Haoyu and Viktor were dissatisfied with the oral ESL classes. Haoyu stated:

> In our oral class, he [the ESL instructor] spent about two-thirds of the time talking about the International Phonetic Alphabet and American English pronunciation... Class discussions basically never go beyond warm-up questions. Their impact on improving my spoken English is almost zero.

Similarly, Viktor questioned the focus of the ESL courses, stating, "Everything we did in [the oral] class was related to pronunciation and trying to make sounds. It wasn't helpful and wasn't what I needed." Their experiences suggested that the ESL course content did not meet the needs of students who sought advanced speaking practice.

This subsection adapts Núñez's (2014) model by showing that although the University provided various language resources (organizational domain) for students (experiential domain), students' experiences (experiential domain) revealed structural issues in how these resources were organized and implemented (organizational domain), demonstrating the interdependence between the organizational and experiential domains.

The Staff Role

According to the University policy, incoming ISs who score below the minimum standardized test requirements (e.g., TOEFL iBT < 100 or IELTS < 6.5) need to take the English Placement Evaluation (EPE). Students who do not meet the minimum requirements and fail the EPE are required to take ESL courses, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. ESL instructors play a key role in addressing ISs' language challenges. This study interviewed two instructors: James, with one year of experience teaching oral courses, and Olivia, with twelve years of teaching graduate-level writing.

When students' self-reported language challenges were compared with ESL instructors' perceptions, accent emerged as a common concern. Three students, Anushka, Kamal, and Kundai, identified the accent as a challenge. Kundai emphasized the importance of exposure to diverse accents for inclusivity. Instructors James and Olivia confirmed that accent-related issues often arise in class. James noted that varied accents made group discussions difficult but stressed that accents reflect identity and need not be changed. Instead, he encouraged the students to embrace them to become more "versatile listeners." Additionally, both the students and staff identified anxiety about making mistakes as a common barrier to speaking. Students Yoo-jin and Jingyi expressed reluctance to speak for fear of errors, whereas ESL instructor James observed similar hesitation among his students. He emphasized that mistakes are part of learning and foster a supportive environment to reduce fear. Over time, students became more confident and more willing to participate in class discussions.

In addition to ESL instructors, administrative staff also recognized the language challenges international students faced and took actions to support them. Emma, who provided full-time administrative support for students, frequently interacted with IGSs in her department. She recognized that English was not the first language for many IGSs and was mindful of the difficulties they faced. To ensure clarity in communication, she mentioned that before sending emails to IGSs, she "asked desk staff, who are undergraduate students, to read emails to ensure clarity and prevent misinterpretation." Emma also tailored messages from the Graduate College to avoid overwhelming IGSs with excessive information.

This subsection adapts Núñez's (2014) model by comparing students' self-reported language challenges with staff perceptions and support. ESL instructors echoed students' concerns about accents and anxiety (intersubjective and experiential domains) and provided targeted support (intersubjective domain). In addition, a full-time staff member improved email clarity to reduce language-related difficulties for many IGSs (intersubjective domain). The findings illustrate the interdependence between the intersubjective and experiential domains.

DISCUSSION

Student Participants' Language Challenges and Coping Strategies

This study examined language challenges as a key stressor in adaptation, often the first obstacle for IGSs adjusting to a new country (Gao & Wesely, 2024). This study specifically analyzed international doctoral students' language

challenges and used the social categories in Núñez's (2014) model to group 14 students as either self-identified English-dominant or English-less-dominant. Students in the English-dominant group reported difficulties understanding cultural and contextual nuances and accents. In support of prior research (Winke & Gass, 2013), this study revealed that having a foreign accent does not necessarily reflect low language proficiency. Compared with the English-dominant group, most students in the English-less-dominant group experienced more anxiety during communication and struggled with cultural and contextual understanding.

Using social categories and the experiential domain in Núñez's (2014) model to analyze students' strategies for coping with language challenges, this study revealed that self-identified English-dominant students primarily adopted problem-focused coping strategies, such as seeking clarification, using online resources, asking for support, and practicing self-compassion. These strategies effectively address language challenges and are aligned with prior research showing that problem-focused coping reduces language barriers and acculturative stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Interestingly, students in the English-less-dominant group used different coping strategies depending on context. In academic settings, they adopted problem-focused strategies, including observational learning, watching YouTube videos, and focused listening. In daily life, some use avoidance strategies, such as limiting in-person interactions or downplaying difficulties. While avoidance provides short-term relief, it is less effective for long-term language development, which is consistent with prior research (McWilliam et al., 2003; Sumer, 2009).

University and Staff Roles in Supporting Students' Language Challenges

This study contributes to existing research by examining how the University's organization of language resources and staff support influence IGSs' language experiences during acculturation. Núñez's (2014) model revealed that while various resources were available (organizational domain), student engagement was mixed (experiential domain) because of limited promotion, lack of follow-up, and misalignment with students' needs (organizational domain). The findings adapt Núñez's (2014) model by highlighting the interdependence, rather than independence, between the organizational and experiential domains: institutional resources influence student experiences, which in turn reveals structural limitations in resource design and implementation.

This study also compares students' interpretations of their language challenges (experiential domain) with staff members' perceptions and support (intersubjective domain) to analyze staff influence on students' experiences. Both the ESL instructors and the students identified accents and fears of mistakes as key challenges. Instructors address them by encouraging the acceptance of different accents and creating supportive environments. An administrative staff member also responded by writing clear, accessible emails. These findings support prior research on staff responsiveness (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Wu et al., 2015) and contrast with studies noting staff frustration or deficit views of ISs (Ryan & Viete, 2009; Kingston & Forland, 2008). The findings also adapt

Núñez's (2014) model by showing that the intersubjective and experiential domains are interrelated and do not function independently.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have several implications for both educators and researchers working to support international doctoral students in the U.S. For educators, students who identified themselves as English-dominant and less English-dominant encountered distinct language challenges, underscoring the need for targeted support. ESL instructors could provide differentiated academic assistance tailored to students' language proficiencies, whereas staff might address diverse cross-cultural adjustment needs by linking students with appropriate campus resources. Because instructors' authority in assessing language ability and designing curricula directly shapes student outcomes, adjustments such as incorporating more oral practice and conducting informal check-ins could help them better identify and respond to students' challenges. Additionally, although the students in this study showed resilience, they consistently emphasized the need for stronger institutional support. Addressing these needs requires coordinated action across multiple offices rather than reliance on a single unit. For example, offices such as international student services and counseling services could collaborate on orientation sessions that address academic expectations and mental health resources. They might also organize regular check-in events or informal discussion groups during the semester to maintain ongoing support.

For researchers, this study contributes to Núñez's (2014) model by showing that the experiential, intersubjective, and organizational domains are interrelated rather than independent. Future research should examine how these domains interact in shaping students' experiences. For example, institutional structures and services (organizational domain) may influence and be influenced by students' acculturation (experiential domain), whereas staff support (intersubjective domain) simultaneously shapes and responds to students' needs. Future studies could also integrate the historicity domain to analyze how broader political and institutional shifts, such as visa policies and funding structures, affect adjustment. Although these changes occurred after the data collection for this study, they continue to shape ISs' experiences and warrant further investigation.

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Author bio

Bing Gao, PhD, earned her doctorate in multilateral education from the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Iowa, USA. Her research focuses on the cross-cultural and intercultural development of international student populations, language policy and planning, and world language education. She is committed to supporting students' academic and personal success. Email: bing-gao@uiowa.edu