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Turkish Students' Academic Adjustment in Russian-Medium Higher Education: Academic Russian, Social Support, and Institutional Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how academic Russian, institutional conditions, and social support shape the academic adjustment of Turkish undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in Russian-medium degree programs in Moscow. Drawing on phenomenologically informed, semistructured interviews with 15 students at three universities, we used reflexive thematic analysis and a study-specific 4A framework (Access, Amplification, Authentication, Awareness) to interpret their experiences. Dense academic Russian, opaque bureaucratic procedures and formal, teacher-centered classroom norms constrained participation, while peers, conational networks and digital platforms provided multilayered support that sustained engagement. Academic Russian functioned as an epistemic threshold regulating entry into disciplinary knowledge, and bureaucratic formality operated as an integration cost that raised the effort required to persist. The findings extend classic models of acculturation, academic integration and social support by showing how social support infrastructures and institutional arrangements jointly shape international students' opportunities to learn and remain in non-Anglophone, Russian-medium programs.

Keywords: academic adjustment, academic Russian, international students, Russian higher education, social support, Turkish students

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INTRODUCTION

Global mobility in higher education has reshaped how learning, identity, and belonging are constructed across national and linguistic borders. As of 2025, nearly 6.9 million students study outside their home country—a figure that has tripled since 2000 (UNESCO, 2025). This rapid expansion has heightened attention to linguistic access, academic integration, and equity across diverse language-of-instruction contexts (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

In this article, "international students" refers to learners who pursue a degree in a country where they are not citizens and where the main language of instruction is not their first language. Across systems, such students encounter intertwined linguistic, academic, cultural and psychosocial challenges that extend well beyond classroom instruction (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Academic adjustment is widely understood as a multidimensional process involving language proficiency, engagement with disciplinary content, classroom participation, peer relations and psychological well-being. Language proficiency is a central determinant of academic performance, particularly when the medium of instruction differs from students' first language (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2021). Cultural expectations and interaction norms shape belonging and socioemotional outcomes (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Studies on Turkish students abroad indicate that linguistic barriers, social isolation, and institutional opacity intersect in shaping adaptation (Arslan & Polat, 2023; Gebru & Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2020), echoing global findings on the combined impact of language, institutional structures, and social support (Akanwa, 2015; Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Within this broader landscape, Russia has become a significant academic destination, with approximately 389,000 international students in 2024 and expected to rise to approximately 410,000 in 2025 (Rostovskaya et al., 2025). International students encounter relatively affordable tuition and geographic proximity alongside dense linguistic demands, bureaucratic formality, and instructor-led pedagogical norms (Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019; Makeeva et al., 2021). In line with national priorities, Russia aims to increase the number of international students in its universities to at least 500,000 by 2030 (President of the Russian Federation, 2024, cl. 3(b)). Within this context, the Turkish case—especially in Russian-medium programs—remains underexamined in relation to this broader pattern. Academic Russian proficiency functions as an epistemic threshold that regulates access to disciplinary knowledge, while visa rules and administrative routines introduce additional institutional friction. We use "epistemic threshold" and "integration cost" as interpretive descriptors of participants' accounts rather than claims of universal causal mechanisms. Existing research documents the sociocultural and institutional adjustment challenges faced by international students in Russia, yet it has paid limited attention to how linguistic, institutional, and social structures jointly shape academic adjustment in a non-Western, Russian-medium context (Tikhonova et al., 2021). Evidence on Turkish students, meanwhile, has focused largely on other national settings; therefore, Turkish students' experiences in Russian-medium degree programs in

Russia appear to remain a comparatively underexplored area (Gebru & Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2020; Ertürk & Nguyen Luu, 2022). Accordingly, this study treats Turkish students not as a proxy for "international students" in general but as a strategically informative subgroup through which broader Russian-medium adjustment dynamics can be examined in a group-specific way.

Despite growing interest in internationalization, research on academic adjustment in Russia exhibits three key limitations. First, many studies homogenize international students, obscuring differences across national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Vershinina et al., 2016; Tikhonova et al., 2021). Second, the literature is dominated by descriptive or survey-based designs; fewer studies examine how students interpret and make sense of their experiences (Tikhonova et al., 2021). Third, research on Turkish students has largely focused on other national settings; consequently, their experiences in Russian-medium degree programs in Russia remain underexamined, particularly with respect to academic Russian proficiency, bureaucratic navigation, and the role of layered social support in shaping adjustment (Ertürk & Nguyen Luu, 2022).

In response, the present study makes three interrelated contributions. First, it recenters academic adjustment in a non-Western, Russian-medium context, extending internationalization debates beyond Anglophone systems. Second, it conceptualizes academic Russian proficiency and bureaucratic load as structural conditions of adjustment that shape access, belonging, and persistence, shifting attention from the language itself to students' linguistic preparedness and the institutional pathways through which they enter Russian-medium programs. Third, it employs a study-specific 4A framework to integrate acculturation, academic integration, and social support perspectives into a coherent account of Turkish students' lived experiences in Russian higher education.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenologically informed qualitative design to explore how Turkish students understand and navigate their academic adjustment as a lived process (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). Analytically, the study draws on three well-established perspectives—Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, Tinto's (1993) theory of academic integration and Cohen and Wills's (1985) model of social support—not as objects of formal theory testing but as scaffolding for the development of a study-specific 4A framework (Access, Amplification, Authentication, Awareness). Here, the 4A is used as an integrative analytic lens and is conceptually distinct from other frameworks that also use the "4A" label.

Turkish students are treated as a theoretically strategic case because their cultural and geographic proximity to Russia, combined with substantial linguistic distance, makes them especially sensitive to how academic Russian proficiency, bureaucratic load and social support interact in shaping adjustment. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to examine how Turkish students make sense of their academic adjustment within the linguistic, cultural, institutional and social conditions of Russian-medium degree programs. The overarching research question is as follows:

How do Turkish students interpret and navigate their academic adjustment within the linguistic, cultural, institutional, and social conditions of Russian-medium degree programs?

LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Theoretical Foundation

Academic adjustment for international students is shaped by the interplay of language demands, cultural expectations, social relationships, and institutional structures (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). To capture this complexity in Russian-medium degree programs, this study draws on Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, Tinto's (1993) theory of academic integration, and Cohen and Wills's (1985) model of social support. These perspectives are brought into dialogue with a study-specific 4A lens that was developed inductively from the data in this context.

Berry (1997) conceptualizes cross-cultural adaptation as a process in which individuals negotiate the relationship between heritage and host cultures through four broad strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Integration—maintaining one's original cultural identity while engaging with the host society—is generally associated with more favorable psychological and academic outcomes (Sam & Berry, 2010), especially when contextual support and perceived inclusion are high (Nguyen et al., 2018). In the Russian context, acculturation involves not only cultural norms but also dense bureaucratic routines and a strongly codified linguistic regime. Studies of foreign students in Soviet and post-Soviet systems document communication barriers, limited interaction with local students, and institutional rigidity (Vershinina et al., 2016), indicating that contextual receptivity and institutional formality constrain acculturative options.

Tinto's (1993) model links student persistence to academic integration (engagement with learning expectations, interaction with instructors, performance) and social integration (sense of belonging, peer relations). Subsequent work shows that belonging is a strong predictor of engagement and cross-cultural interaction (Glass & Westmont, 2014). In Russian-medium programs, academic Russian proficiency, relationships with instructors, and navigation of formal procedures appear central to integration (Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019). Building on Tinto, this study foregrounds institutional bureaucracy—visa rules, document control, attendance monitoring, and communication with administrative units—as an "integration cost" that can erode motivation and belonging when insufficiently supported (Vershinina et al., 2016).

Cohen and Wills (1985) distinguish between the direct effects of social support on well-being and its buffering effects in mitigating stress. Supportive networks enhance resilience, facilitate language development, and strengthen academic engagement (Lou & Noels, 2020; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). For international students abroad, social support typically emerges from layered networks that include conational peers, wider international communities, family

ties, and online groups (Akanwa, 2015; Arslan & Polat, 2023). Evidence on Turkish students likewise suggests that similar multilayered support patterns have been observed across different national contexts (Arslan & Polat, 2023). These networks function not only as emotional resources but also as practical infrastructures for navigating institutional expectations. Accordingly, in this study, social support is conceptualized as a mechanism linking linguistic and cultural constraints to both academic and psychological outcomes.

The 4A Framework

The label "4A" has been used to describe different conceptual frameworks across fields. In this article, we employ a study-specific 4A framework—Access, Amplification, Authentication, Awareness—developed inductively from participants' accounts through iterative coding in the Russian-medium context. Themes and subthemes were generated from the data rather than predefined, and the four 4A constructs were introduced after recurrent patterns coalesced into four core problem areas. Berry's acculturation framework, Tinto's integration theory, and Cohen and Wills's social support model are used as sensitizing concepts to interpret these inductively derived constructs rather than as an a priori coding structure. This study-specific 4A is conceptually distinct from other uses of the "4A" label and is intended as an integrative analytic lens rather than a standardized or universal framework.

Access refers to language- and information-mediated entry into disciplinary knowledge and institutional expectations (academic Russian proficiency, course requirements, assessment criteria, administrative procedures). Amplification captures how bureaucratic and pedagogical arrangements may intensify or alleviate barriers, as described by participants (opaque regulations, formal instructor-led norms, high-stakes oral assessment). Authentication concerns perceived recognition and legitimacy in classroom and assessment interactions. We use "authentication" descriptively to capture perceived recognition without making claims of systematic institutional injustice beyond these accounts. Awareness denotes the evolving coping repertoire and social support mobilization students develop over time.

Taken together, these frameworks specify complementary parts of the adjustment process that this study traces in Russian-medium programs. Berry's acculturation model sensitizes the analysis to how students negotiate cultural participation and identity under varying degrees of institutional receptivity, while Tinto's integration theory highlights how engagement with academic expectations and belonging in the university community shape persistence. Cohen and Wills's social support model, in turn, clarifies why layered support networks can have both direct benefits and buffering effects when students face linguistic strain and administrative stress. Building on these insights, the study-specific 4A framework serves as an integrative analytic lens that maps (a) language- and information-mediated entry into learning (Access), (b) institutional and pedagogical arrangements that intensify or reduce barriers (Amplification), (c) perceived recognition and credibility in classroom and assessment interactions (Authentication), and (d) the evolving coping repertoire supported by social

networks (Awareness). This synthesis provides a coherent rationale for interpreting participants' accounts without treating the study as a formal test of any single theory.

While Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, Tinto's (1993) model of academic integration, and Cohen and Wills's (1985) model of social support each illuminate key dimensions of international students' adjustment, the present findings suggest that their combined application still leaves the interaction between linguistic access, institutional amplification, and recognition dynamics underspecified in Russian-medium programs. The study-specific 4A framework addresses this by bringing these dimensions into a single, process-oriented analytic lens, clarifying how access to knowledge, the institutional shaping of barriers, and perceived academic recognition jointly structure students' adjustment trajectories in this context.

Empirical Background

Global research consistently shows that academic adjustment rests on the interaction of proficiency in the language of instruction, cultural adaptation and social support (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Glass & Westmont, 2014). Language barriers restrict not only communication but also cognitive access to disciplinary knowledge, shaping participation, assessment and feedback (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2021). Cultural expectations, perceived discrimination and mismatched interaction norms further intensify stress and undermine belonging (Ward et al., 2001; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Belonging and peer interaction emerge as decisive predictors of academic persistence, while cultural intelligence and motivational orientations support adaptive coping and resilience (Nguyen et al., 2018; Lou & Noels, 2020).

Within the *Journal of International Students*, prior work has documented how language proficiency, social support, and institutional practices shape international students' academic experiences, often in Anglophone or English-medium settings (Akanwa, 2015; Demir et al., 2025; Gao, 2026; Sari et al., 2026; Volkova & Kolesov, 2022). By focusing on Turkish students in Russian-medium programs and foregrounding academic Russian proficiency and bureaucratic load, the present study extends this literature to a linguistically demanding, non-Anglophone context.

Evidence on Turkish students in international contexts suggests similar dynamics, with linguistic challenges, social support, and institutional expectations jointly shaping academic experiences (Arslan & Polat, 2023; Ertürk & Nguyen Luu, 2022). Related evidence on international students in Turkey likewise highlights the convergence of language, belonging, and institutional expectations in non-Anglophone settings (Gebru & Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2020; Demir et al., 2025). Together, these strands provide a comparative backdrop for examining how such mechanisms unfold in Russian-medium degree programs.

Russia has become a regional hub for international education, with its Education Export Strategy playing a central role in expanding institutional capacity and international recruitment (Dekhnich et al., 2021). Its attractiveness is linked to relatively affordable tuition, strong STEM programs and state-

sponsored scholarships (Bondarenko et al., 2022). At the same time, structural features of Russian higher education create distinctive conditions for adaptation. Linguistically, academic Russian proficiency operates as both a communication resource and an epistemic filter: preparatory courses often fail to provide discipline-specific terminology, leaving students underprepared for lectures, readings and assessments (Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019). Research on English-medium instruction similarly shows that unclear language policies, uneven lecturer proficiency and instructor-centered norms limit interaction and do not fully remove communicative barriers (Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2021; Volkova & Kolesov, 2022). Cultural distance, in-group reliance and ambiguous institutional expectations add further strain, while bureaucratic procedures and visa rules generate chronic stress that affects persistence (Vershinina et al., 2016; Fedotova, 2021; Lenart & Markovina, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study employed a phenomenologically informed qualitative design to explore how Turkish students make sense of their academic adjustment in Russian-medium higher education (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The emphasis was on participants' lived experiences of academic language, institutional procedures, and everyday interactions rather than on estimating the prevalence of specific difficulties.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to identify patterned meanings across accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Early coding and theme development were primarily data-led, while the study-specific 4A framework informed the later stages of interpretation and discussion. RTA was chosen for its compatibility with an interpretive, reflexive approach to qualitative analysis.

Participants and Sampling

Fifteen Turkish students enrolled in Russian universities during the 2024–2025 academic year participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich cases with diverse experiences of adjustment in Russian-medium programs (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013). In line with the concept of information power, sample adequacy was assessed based on the richness and specificity of the data rather than numerical thresholds (Malterud et al., 2016).

The inclusion criteria were (1) citizenship of Türkiye, (2) enrollment in an undergraduate or graduate degree program, and (3) completion of at least one academic year in Russia. Participants were recruited from three major state universities in Moscow—National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN), and Lomonosov Moscow State University (MGU)—to capture variation across institutional contexts. The sample varied in age (19–33), gender (8 male, 7 female), level of study, and field. All participants provided written informed consent and were assigned anonymized codes (S1–S15).

Recruitment procedures

Participants were recruited through Turkish student communities in Moscow, including social media groups (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) and university networks, as well as via snowball sampling. A brief study announcement outlining the purpose, eligibility criteria, voluntary participation, and confidentiality safeguards was shared in relevant groups. Interested students contacted the researcher directly and were screened for eligibility (citizenship of Türkiye, current enrollment in a degree program, and completion of at least one academic year in Russia). Recruitment continued until the sample provided sufficient informational richness and variation, consistent with the study's phenomenological aim and the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Interviews were then scheduled with eligible volunteers.

The sample included both undergraduate and master's students to reflect diverse trajectories in Russian-medium programs. Given the qualitative design and sample size, analysis focused on cross-cutting patterns while remaining attentive to differences by level and field during coding and theme refinement.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of participants (S1–S15)

Participant	Gender	Age	Level	Field	Years in Russia
S1	Female	21	Undergraduate	Social Sciences	2
S2	Female	20	Undergraduate	Economics	2
S3	Male	22	Undergraduate	Engineering	2
S4	Male	24	Undergraduate	Medicine	3
S5	Female	23	Master's	International Relations	2
S6	Male	22	Undergraduate	Sports Sciences	2
S7	Female	21	Undergraduate	Engineering	2
S8	Male	26	Master's	Social Sciences	2
S9	Male	25	Undergraduate	Law	3
S10	Female	25	Master's	Economics	2
S11	Male	25	Master's	Journalism	2
S12	Male	23	Undergraduate	Law	2
S13	Female	19	Undergraduate	Social Sciences	2
S14	Female	22	Undergraduate	Engineering	2
S15	Male	33	Master's	Social Sciences	3

Note. Years of study indicate total academic years spent in Russia.

Data Collection

Data were collected in summer 2025 through semistructured interviews conducted face-to-face and online (Zoom, WhatsApp, Telegram). The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and were transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide was informed by prior research on international student adaptation and by the study's theoretical scaffolding (Berry, 1997; Tinto, 1993; Cohen & Wills, 1985). A pilot study with four Turkish students resulted in minor revisions to wording and sequencing. The final protocol addressed five areas: academic adjustment, language and communication, cultural differences and daily life, social support, and coping strategies.

All interviews were conducted in Turkish to preserve expressive nuance. Quotations were translated into English by the researcher using a meaning-based approach, with selected excerpts reviewed against the original transcripts and, where appropriate, shared with participants to support interpretive accuracy. Selected excerpts are presented in both Turkish and English in Appendix A to enhance translation transparency.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The researcher engaged in iterative familiarization and memoing, conducted line-by-line coding of the Turkish transcripts, and developed candidate themes that were reviewed and refined across the dataset. Coding was conducted in Turkish to preserve participants' meanings, while theme labels and the analytic narrative were developed in English for an international readership. NVivo 15 was used to manage the dataset, support retrieval of coded segments, and maintain an audit trail of analytic memos and decisions. All coding was conducted by the author, with attention to variation and counterpatterns during theme refinement. As the analysis progressed, four recurrent problem areas emerged; the 4A labels (Access, Amplification, Authentication, Awareness) were introduced to organize the inductively generated themes as an integrative analytic lens. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, Tinto's (1993) theory of academic integration, and Cohen and Wills's (1985) model of social support informed interpretation as sensitizing concepts rather than as a priori coding categories.

Table 2 presents the analytic mapping from example codes to themes and the corresponding 4A constructs.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance trustworthiness, the study drew on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through iterative transcript engagement, member checking of selected excerpts, and the use of verbatim quotations. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting analytic decisions and revisions. Transferability was supported through a thick description of the institutional context and participant characteristics.

Table 2

Mapping example codes, themes, and the 4A constructs

Example codes (data-led)	Theme/Subtheme	4A construct	Illustrative excerpt (participant)
Academic Russian is different; professors speak too fast; oral exam difficulty	Discipline-specific register and processing load	**Access**	Prep year wasn't enough; academic Russian is very different and complex (S15)
Can not show what I know; staying quiet; fear of errors	Limited participation and clarification-seeking	**Access**	I know the answer, but I cannot say it correctly, so I stay quiet (S7)
Unclear rules; multiple platforms; older students explain	Opaque information channels	**Access**	Sometimes the rule changes; We determine later (S3)
Visa renewal; registration; documentation; deadlines	Bureaucratic load competing with study	**Amplification**	Every week there is a new document or rule; it is stressful and confusing (S13)
Instructor-centered; formal hierarchy; power distance	Classroom hierarchy amplifying hesitation	**Amplification**	Here the professor is more distant; you don't want to disturb them with questions (S4)
Knowing but not showing; fear of mockery; mispronunciation broke confidence	Fragile academic identities and performative risk	**Authentication**	I often know the answer, but I do not know how to explain it in Russian (S1)
Professors think you're lazy if mistakes; accent/grammar reduces credibility	Perceived credibility deficits	**Authentication**	When you speak with mistakes, some professors think you are lazy. (S9)
Turkish peers guided everything; study groups; tracking deadlines	Peer infrastructures and strategic coping over time	**Awareness**	When I arrived, Turkish students guided me in everything (S2)

Note. Example codes and excerpts are illustrative; participant identifiers are anonymized (e.g., S7).

Confirmability was supported through reflexive memoing and attention to variation and counterpatterns during theme refinement.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The researcher is a Turkish national and conducted all interviews in Turkish, which supported rapport and enabled participants to express nuanced meanings in a familiar language. At the same time, this insider position required active reflexivity to minimize the risk of overnormalizing shared assumptions. Reflexive memoing was used throughout data collection and analysis to document emerging interpretations and potential biases, and the analysis attended to counterpatterns and disconfirming cases. To support interpretive and translation accuracy, selected excerpts and their English translations were checked against the original Turkish transcripts and, where feasible, shared with participants to confirm meaning.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the aims of the study, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All identifying information was removed during transcription, and participants were assigned anonymized codes (S1–S15). Data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher.

Use of AI Tools

Artificial intelligence tools (e.g., ChatGPT) were used only for language refinement and formatting during manuscript preparation. No AI tool was used in the study design, data collection, transcription, coding, or analysis; the author takes full responsibility for the content.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings from semistructured interviews with fifteen Turkish students in Russian-medium programs in Moscow. The analysis generated four themes capturing how participants navigated academic language, institutional procedures, classroom recognition, and support networks. These themes are presented in data-led terms; the study-specific 4A framework is used as an interpretive lens to clarify how these patterns connect across language, institutional arrangements, and social support over time.

Theme 1: Access – Academic Russian Proficiency and Opaque Information Channels

Access emerged primarily as a problem of language and information. Students drew a sharp distinction between everyday conversational Russian and

the dense, discipline-specific academic register used in lectures, textbooks, and assessments. Twelve participants reported persistent difficulties with this register, which required advanced vocabulary, complex syntax, and rapid processing even after the preparatory year. As one student explained, "Prep year wasn't enough; academic Russian is very different and complex" (S15). Another commented, "Professors speak too fast, and I fall behind immediately" (S6). Preparatory courses were generally perceived as enabling basic communication but not as providing sufficient preparation for technical lectures, specialized readings, or oral examinations.

This gap was often experienced as a real-time processing overload: participants described being able to understand material when studying slowly but falling behind when required to follow dense explanations at lecture speed. One participant noted that even when they could grasp the content through careful reading, the pace of classroom interaction made it difficult to keep up, take usable notes, and participate meaningfully (S1). Another described how language constraints sometimes limited the ability to express complex reasoning in ways that reflected their actual competence, shaping both confidence and participation in academic spaces (S15).

Participants frequently described this disconnect through vivid comparisons, emphasizing that general Russian instruction did not prepare them for discipline-specific academic demands. As one participant put it, the preparation felt misaligned with what the university needed: "They taught us how to wash the car, but in university, we are expected to drive it in heavy traffic" (S1).

Students highlighted three interrelated aspects of restricted access. First, the vocabulary and conceptual density of lectures made it difficult to follow disciplinary arguments in real time. Several participants reported feeling confident in their understanding when reading slowly or studying in Turkish but unable to express this adequately in oral or written examinations. As S11 summarized, "I understand when I read slowly, but in the exam, my Russian is not fast enough to show what I know."

This pattern was especially salient in high-stakes evaluative settings where time pressure required rapid comprehension and immediate discipline-appropriate articulation. For example, one participant noted that even when they understood the answer, they struggled to express it using the expected academic terminology and genre conventions, making it difficult to demonstrate substantive knowledge under exam conditions (S12). Across accounts, students described "knowing" but being unable to "show" knowledge convincingly within the demands of academic Russian.

Second, oral communication with instructors was constrained by concerns about accuracy and formality. While many perceived instructors as generally patient, several described professors as visibly frustrated when students paused, searched for words, or made grammatical errors in Russian. This reduced their willingness to ask questions or seek clarification. As one participant noted, "I know the answer, but I cannot say it correctly, so I stay quiet" (S7).

Third, access difficulties extended to information channels. Students struggled to obtain clear guidance about course expectations, assessment criteria,

and administrative procedures. Instructions were often delivered quickly in Russian, posted across multiple platforms, or circulated informally through class chats. Participants described relying heavily on peers to decode requirements: "Sometimes the rule changes, but only Russian students know it. We determine later from them or from older Turkish students" (S3).

Overall, access to disciplinary participation depended not only on general Russian but also on students' ability to manage discipline-specific discourse and navigate opaque information channels.

Theme 2: Amplification – Bureaucratic Load and Classroom Hierarchies

Amplification describes how institutional and pedagogical arrangements intensified or mitigated the barriers associated with limited access. For Turkish students, the combination of bureaucratic formalism and hierarchical classroom norms often magnifies the pressures generated by linguistic and cultural distance.

Participants consistently portrayed administrative procedures as complex, repetitive and emotionally taxing. Tasks such as visa renewal, registration, dormitory documentation and medical forms often required multiple visits, precise compliance and careful monitoring of deadlines. One student stated, "Every week there is a new document or rule; it is stressful and confusing" (S13). Another described worrying more about missing a migration registration deadline than about an upcoming exam. These procedures demanded sustained attention and were experienced as an additional layer of work alongside disciplinary content.

Beyond being time-consuming, bureaucratic demands were described as emotionally draining because small documentation errors could trigger repeated visits and delays. One participant described a prolonged signature and document-approval process that jeopardized participation in an extracurricular activity and created a strong sense of being "stuck" in administrative loops (S6). Such accounts illustrate how bureaucracy functioned as an additional layer of uncertainty and stress, competing directly with academic time and attention.

Bureaucracy was framed as a recurring workload that competed with academic demands and raised the perceived cost of persistence. One participant described near-monthly document requests from the dorm administration and the international office, along with queues and paperwork errors stemming from limited Russian, as exhausting and repeatedly disruptive to academic routines (S5).

Classroom norms further amplified these pressures. Russian classrooms were widely described as formal and instructor-centered, with limited space for open questions or student-led discussion. This atmosphere reinforced linguistic hesitation and heightened perceived power distance. As S4 reflected, "Here, the professor is more distant; you don't want to disturb them with questions."

Hierarchical norms were also experienced through moments of evaluative exposure, when linguistic mistakes became highly visible. One participant recalled receiving feedback that their academic writing sounded "machine translated," which they experienced as discouraging and confidence-reducing

(S11). These moments amplified hesitation, particularly in settings where students perceived limited tolerance for pauses, accents, or nonstandard phrasing.

Participants described institutional services as only partially buffering these dynamics. International offices and program coordinators were essential for resolving specific administrative problems, but support was often experienced as reactive and limited in scope.

Taken together, bureaucratic formalism and classroom hierarchy intensified the consequences of restricted access to language and information, increasing the time, energy, and emotional labor required for academic adjustment.

Theme 3: Authentication – Fragile Academic Identities and Classroom Silence

Authentication concerns how students' academic identities were recognized, validated or questioned within Russian-medium institutions. For many participants, the combination of limited linguistic access and amplified institutional demands produced fragile forms of recognition that left them physically present yet only partially heard.

A recurrent pattern was the experience of 'knowing but not showing': feeling able to grasp disciplinary concepts yet unable to display this knowledge convincingly in Russian. This dynamic was not idiosyncratic; multiple participants described moments in which linguistic insecurity curtailed their willingness to speak despite conceptual understanding. As S1 explained, 'When the professor asks a question in class, I often know the answer, but I do not know how to explain it in Russian. I'm afraid my classmates might mock me or laugh' (S1).

This fear was reinforced by specific incidents that participants described as emotionally salient. One participant recounted a classroom presentation in which a mispronounced word prompted laughter from peers; the participant described "freezing," struggling to continue, and later avoiding similar speaking situations for some time (S13). Such moments contributed to fragile academic identities, where language errors were experienced not merely as communicative issues but as threats to belonging and competence.

Similarly, S10 described how prior preparation did not eliminate the performative risks of speaking under evaluative pressure: 'Before class I prepare and read English and Turkish materials, and since we study economics, the topics are often comparable. However, in an oral exam I only partly understood the question and was afraid to answer—what if I said something wrong or could not pronounce a word properly? Once I mispronounced a word and later learned it was slang; I apologized to my teacher. That experience broke my confidence, and now I feel afraid to answer even questions I know' (S10). Others recounted oral exams where linguistic errors seemed to overshadow substantive understanding.

Students were acutely aware of how their spoken Russian shaped others' perceptions of their competence. Several felt reduced to their accent or grammar, particularly in early semesters. One participant noted, "When you speak with mistakes, some professors think you are lazy or not prepared, even if you studied a lot in Turkish" (S9).

In some cases, participants described feedback suggesting that form and genre expectations mattered as much as substantive knowledge. One participant recalled being told that their writing resembled an inappropriate genre (e.g., "a police report") rather than the expected legal argumentation style—an experience they interpreted as a signal that linguistic form shaped how their competence was evaluated (S9).

Over time, many students responded by recalibrating how and when they participated. Some limited their interventions to moments when they felt confident in both the content and the phrasing; others avoided speaking in large lectures but engaged more in small-group settings or informal conversations with peers. While these strategies reduced immediate anxiety, they also reinforced patterns of limited visibility in formal academic spaces.

Participants' accounts suggest that limited academic Russian proficiency, instructor-led pedagogy, and hierarchical classroom norms sometimes constrain perceived credibility and willingness to speak, shaping fragile forms of academic recognition in Russian-medium classrooms.

Theme 4: Awareness – Social Support and Strategic Coping over Time

Awareness refers to the evolving reflexive understanding that students developed about the Russian system and the strategies they used to navigate it. This theme captures how social support networks and individual coping practices helped students monitor risks, reinterpret difficulties, and adjust their ways of studying, socializing, and persisting. Participants relied on multilayered networks involving Turkish peers, Russian and other international friends, family, and institutional offices. Turkish student associations and informal peer groups were consistently described as the most influential support in the initial months. Students received guidance on housing, registration, documentation, transport, and everyday routines. "When I arrived, Turkish students guided me in everything," explained S2. These networks also provided emotional comfort by offering spaces where students could share experiences, validate challenges, and preserve cultural familiarity.

Importantly, these networks often functioned as strategic infrastructures rather than only emotional support. Participants described practical routines such as maintaining dual sets of notes (rapid lecture notes followed by structured rewriting), rehearsing explanations aloud in Russian, and using peer groups to translate institutional expectations into actionable study practices (S12). Others described adapting participation strategies—for instance, shifting to written contributions (e.g., postmeeting summaries) when fast-paced discussions were difficult to follow, thereby making their competence visible through alternative channels (S14). These practices illustrate how "support" operated as a mechanism for institutional literacy and academic self-management over time.

Russian peers played an important role in linguistic development and cultural interpretation. Students who formed such friendships reported faster improvement in academic vocabulary, clearer understanding of classroom expectations and increased social confidence. As S6 noted, "Making friends from different countries helped me improve my language and understand their culture." Regular

communication with family provided emotional stability and continuity, with S12 commenting, "Regular calls reduced loneliness and gave me strength."

Participants also described a range of coping strategies that complemented these networks. Academically, they formed study groups, rewatched lecture recordings, used online resources (including Turkish-language explanations), and adopted structured note-review routines to compensate for comprehension gaps. Socially, they joined clubs, sports teams, and informal gatherings to broaden networks and practice Russian in lower-pressure settings.

Many participants described a shift over time from ad hoc, crisis-driven responses to more anticipatory practices, particularly around administrative timelines and course-specific language demands. They began tracking deadlines, consulting senior peers earlier, and following class communication channels more systematically to avoid last-minute surprises (S8).

Through the lens of Awareness, social support and coping strategies appear not merely as individual adjustments but as evolving repertoires for navigating a structurally demanding system, enabling students to reinterpret difficulties, decide when to persist and align their efforts with the constraints and possibilities of Russian-medium programs. Seen through the 4A lens, these evolving repertoires suggest a shift from reactive survival responses to anticipatory forms of institutional literacy mediated by peer infrastructures.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that Turkish students' academic adjustment in Russian-medium higher education is structured by four interrelated processes captured by the 4A framework of Access, Amplification, Authentication and Awareness. Limited academic Russian proficiency and restricted access to institutional information, amplified by bureaucratic load and instructor-led norms, shaped fragile academic identities and increased reliance on evolving social support and coping strategies.

Access emerged as a central condition of adjustment. Participants reported that everyday communication improved after the preparatory year, yet uneven academic Russian proficiency—particularly in discipline-specific discourse and rapid delivery—remained a persistent barrier to epistemic access. This pattern supports research showing that language competence shapes engagement with disciplinary content, participation in academic dialog and interpretation of feedback across language-of-instruction contexts (Andrade, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García, 2021). In Russian universities, prior studies similarly document how insufficient preparation in discipline-specific language and fast-paced, lecture-based delivery restrict international students' participation (Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019). The present study extends this work by conceptualizing academic Russian proficiency as an epistemic threshold: a linguistic and institutional filter that governs who can access, articulate and be recognized as knowing within Russian-medium programs.

The analysis also shows that administrative opacity and formal pedagogical norms amplified academic demands. Visa processes, dormitory registration, document verification and routine communication with administrative units generated a constant layer of institutional friction. Earlier research links

bureaucratic complexity and migration regulations to chronic stress and feelings of precariousness among international students in Russia (Vershinina et al., 2016; Fedotova, 2021; Dekhnich et al., 2021). In this study, these stresses interacted with linguistic challenges to create a dual barrier: students navigated Russian-medium academic discourse while simultaneously deciphering complex bureaucratic expectations. Within the 4A framework, these dynamics exemplify Amplification, as institutional arrangements intensify the effects of limited access to language and information and raise the integration cost of remaining in the system.

Social support emerged as a primary mechanism mitigating these pressures and was closely tied to Awareness. Turkish student associations, friendships with Russian and other international students and regular contact with family functioned as emotional, informational and practical buffers. This pattern aligns with Cohen and Wills's (1985) buffering hypothesis and with evidence that peer networks, belonging and perceived support are central to academic engagement and well-being (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Lou & Noels, 2020; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). The present findings add nuance by showing that these networks also facilitate epistemic access by helping students decode disciplinary terminology, assessment criteria and institutional procedures.

The recurrent pattern of classroom silence reflects struggles over Authentication. Students who felt unable to display their knowledge in Russian questioned whether teachers and peers perceived them as legitimate academic participants. International research shows that unequal participation opportunities and power asymmetries can undermine academic belonging (Ward et al., 2001; Andrade, 2006; Gebru & Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2020). The present findings can be read alongside Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice, in which speakers' contributions are undervalued or left unheard due to structural positioning. Here, the intersection of limited academic Russian proficiency, instructor-led pedagogy and institutional hierarchy created conditions under which Turkish students were physically present yet only partially heard. Authentication thus refers both to external recognition by staff and peers and to students' own sense of entitlement to speak, ask questions, and claim academic space; it is not intended as a claim of systematic institutional injustice beyond these accounts.

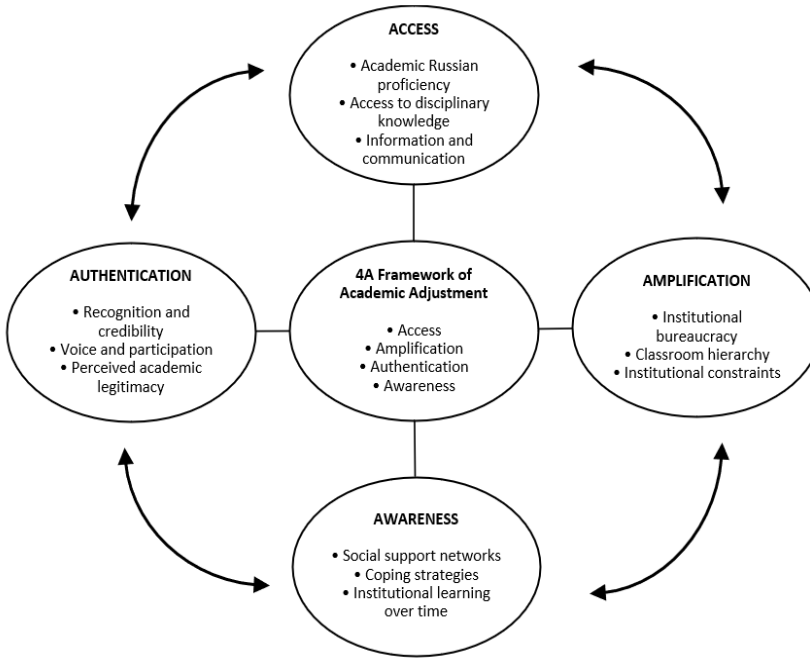
Taken together, the findings extend or nuance three major frameworks. Berry's (1997) acculturation model is illuminated by showing how institutional formality and language-mediated epistemic access can produce situations in which students seek integration socially while experiencing partial separation academically (Sam & Berry, 2010; Ertürk & Nguyen Luu, 2022). Tinto's (1993) integration theory is elaborated by foregrounding bureaucratic cost as a determinant of persistence in highly formal systems, complementing work linking belonging and cross-cultural interaction to success (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Cohen and Wills's (1985) model is enriched by demonstrating that social support networks operate epistemically as well as psychologically, mediating access to knowledge and to tacit institutional expectations.

The 4A framework integrates these strands by clarifying how linguistic access, institutional amplification, identity authentication and developing

awareness collectively shape adjustment in Russian-medium programs. It offers a context-sensitive analytic lens for theorizing how combinations of language regimes, bureaucratic load and social support shape students' opportunities to learn and persist in non-Anglophone higher education. As shown in Figure 1, the 4A framework summarizes these mutually reinforcing relationships as a cyclical process rather than a linear sequence. This framework also points to practical leverage points—discipline-specific language support, procedural transparency, and recognition-oriented pedagogies—which we outline in the implications section.

Figure 1

The 4A Framework of Academic Adjustment in Russian-Medium Higher Education.



Note. The framework illustrates the dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationships between Access, Amplification, Authentication, and Awareness. The arrows represent cyclical interactions rather than a linear or unidirectional process, based on inductive analysis of participants' accounts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Turkish students interpret and navigate their academic adjustment within Russian-medium higher education. Consistent with international research on academic adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), the findings show that adjustment is shaped by the

interdependence of linguistic structure, institutional procedures and social support resources. Uneven academic Russian proficiency functions as an epistemic threshold shaping access to disciplinary knowledge and participation in academic communities, while bureaucratic opacity increases the structural costs of persistence and heightens uncertainty (Vershinina et al., 2016; Fedotova, 2021). Social support networks operate as mediating structures that link linguistic and institutional constraints to academic engagement and psychological well-being, echoing the buffering role of support identified in prior work (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Glass & Westmont, 2014).

By situating these dynamics within Russian higher education, the study adds nuance to existing models of international student adaptation and underscores the need to incorporate institutional formality, administrative load and language-mediated epistemic access into theories of academic adjustment (Berry, 1997; Tinto, 1993). The 4A framework offers an integrative analytic tool for tracing how Access, Amplification, Authentication and Awareness unfold in linguistically demanding, non-Anglophone contexts. Rather than serving as a universal model, it provides a context-sensitive way of relating students' lived experiences to the structural conditions of Russian-medium programs and can inform future comparative and longitudinal research on non-Anglophone higher education systems.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Given the qualitative design and relatively small, context-specific sample, these implications should be interpreted as analytically grounded and indicative rather than prescriptive and should not be treated as universally generalizable policy claims. They are intended to inform context-sensitive practices in Russian-medium higher education and should be considered with attention to institutional scope and feasibility.

The findings indicate three leverage points that could strengthen international students' participation and well-being in Russian-medium higher education. Read through the 4A lens, these implications target linguistic access (Access), recognition and belonging (Authentication and Awareness), and the institutional conditions that amplify or reduce strain (Amplification).

Pedagogical level: discipline-based academic Russian support (Access).

Institutions could embed structured academic Russian proficiency support within faculties and align it with core disciplinary genres such as lectures, oral exams, and written assignments. CLIL-informed or similar approaches may integrate language development with conceptual mastery more effectively than general preparatory courses (Dolbilova, 2023; Dolzhikova, 2024).

Institutional level: intercultural mentoring and peer integration (awareness and authentication).

Institutions could establish formal mentoring that pairs international and local students and supports mixed peer groups in clubs, study circles, and cocurricular activities. Collaboration with student associations could institutionalize peer-led

orientation and low-stakes language-practice spaces that increase opportunities for recognition.

Governance level: bureaucratic transparency and administrative load reduction (Amplification).

Universities and relevant administrative units could streamline high-friction procedures affecting international students, including visas, registration, and housing-related requirements. They could also provide predictable bilingual guidance with clear timelines through stable digital channels.

For institutions seeking meaningful internationalization beyond enrollment numbers, these recommendations underscore that linguistic access, procedural clarity, and intercultural belonging are central conditions for academic success in Russian-medium programs. Where feasible, such measures could be piloted at the faculty or program level before broader institutional implementation.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The sample consists of students from three major universities in Moscow, so the findings may not extend to regional or private institutions with different organizational cultures and resources. Interviews were conducted in Turkish and translated into English, which may have introduced minor semantic shifts despite careful checking. The study prioritizes shared patterns and therefore does not provide systematic comparisons by level of study or academic field. The researcher's insider position as a Turkish student in Russia may also have influenced both rapport and interpretation, although reflexive journaling and an audit trail were used to mitigate this risk. All coding and analysis were conducted by a single researcher, while this approach is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, it may limit intersubjective validation despite the use of audit trails, reflexive memoing, and systematic attention to variation and counterpatterns. Finally, the cross-sectional design restricts the analysis of how Access, Amplification, Authentication, and Awareness evolve over time.

As in most phenomenological studies, the aim is not statistical generalization but analytical transferability. The findings may be transferable to other linguistically demanding and bureaucratically structured non-Western higher education contexts, particularly those characterized by strong institutional formality and language-mediated access to knowledge, but not to systems shaped by substantially different institutional norms or language regimes. Readers are therefore encouraged to consider similarities and differences between the Russian context and their own settings when assessing the applicability of the results.

Directions For Future Research

Future research could deepen and extend these findings in several ways. Discourse-analytic or corpus-based studies of the academic Russian register across disciplines could provide finer-grained evidence on how linguistic structure shapes epistemic access and participation and how specific genres (e.g., lectures, examinations, feedback) privilege certain linguistic resources.

Longitudinal or mixed-methods designs could trace how bureaucratic load, institutional transparency, and changes in language proficiency influence academic persistence and well-being over time, capturing shifts in Access, Amplification, Authentication, and Awareness across different stages of study.

Finally, institutional ethnographies or governance-focused studies could examine how university-level procedures and decision-making routines are experienced by international students and how they might be redesigned to reduce administrative friction. Such studies would clarify how institutional transparency, linguistic mediation, and social support shape resilience and academic success in transnational education and test the usefulness of the 4A framework in other non-Anglophone higher education systems.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Interview Excerpts in Turkish and English Translation

This appendix provides selected excerpts in both the original Turkish and English translation to support transparency and allow readers to assess translation fidelity.

Participant S1 (Authentication: Classroom participation and fear of negative evaluation) Interview: July 2025

Original Turkish:

"Hoca sınıfta soru sorduğunda çoğu zaman cevabını biliyorum ama Rusça nasıl anlatacağımı bilemiyorum. Arkadaşlarımın benimle dalga geçmesinden ya da gülmesinden korkuyorum, bu yüzden genelde sessiz kalıyorum."

English translation:

"When the professor asks a question in class, I often know the answer, but I do not know how to explain it in Russian. I am afraid that my classmates might mock me or laugh at me, so I usually stay quiet."

Participant S11 (Amplification: Language constraints and evaluative pressure) Interview: July 2025

Original Turkish:

"Etkilememesi imkansızdı. Gazetecilik atölye dersleri interaktiftir, fikirler hızla havada uçuşur. Ben fikrimi formüle edene kadar, konu 10 kere değişmiş oluyordu. Bu beni çok frustre etti. Sınavlarda, özellikle 'bir haber bülteni yazın' veya 'şu olay için manşetler bulun' gibi pratik sınavlarda, yaratıcılığım dilimin sınırlarıyla kısıtlanıyordu. Basit, hatasız ama sıradan metinler yazabiliyordum sadece. En kötüsü, bir kere hocamız bana 'Senin yazdığın haber, sanki Google Translate'ten geçirilmiş gibi duruyor' demişti. Bu, o dönem için beni çok üzmüş ve özgüvenimi sarsmıştı. O an, dil engelinin beni mesleğimin temelinden (iyi yazmak) nasıl mahrum bıraktığını acı bir şekilde anladım."

English translation:

"It was impossible for it not to affect me. Journalism workshop classes are interactive; ideas fly around quickly. By the time I formulated my idea, the topic had changed ten times. This frustrated me a lot. In exams—especially practical exams such as 'write a news bulletin' or 'find headlines for a particular event'—my creativity was limited by the boundaries of my language. I could only write simple, error-free, but ordinary texts. The worst part was that once our instructor told me, 'Your news story looks as if it has been run through Google Translate.' That truly upset me at the time and shook my confidence. In that moment, I painfully realized how the language barrier deprived me of the core of my profession—writing well."

Participant S14 (Awareness: Strategic adaptation and alternative participation) Interview: July 2025

Original Turkish:

"Proje gruplarında, 'yazılı' katkıya odaklandım. Toplantılarda hızlı konuşmaları takip edemeyince, sonrasında toplantı notlarını düzenleyip, eksik kalan kısımları

tamamlayarak e-posta ile gönderdim. Bu şekilde, sessiz kaldığım halde katkımı gösterebildim."

English translation:

"In project groups, I focused on making 'written' contributions. When I could not follow fast-paced talk during meetings, I later organized the meeting notes, completed the missing parts, and sent them by email. In this way, even though I stayed quiet, I could still demonstrate my contribution."

Participant S15 (Access & Authentication: Academic language and identity tension) Interview: July 2025

Original Turkish:

"Rusça dil hazırlık okudum ama akademik Rusça çok farklı ve karmaşık, kendimi başarısız hissediyorum. Bu cümle, ilk yılımın özeti gibiydi. Hazırlık, günlük iletişim için yeterliydi, ama Sosyal Bilimler'deki soyut kavramların, teorik tartışmaların diline hiç hazırlamamıştı… En zoru, 'kendimi başarısız hissetmek'ti. Türkiye'de saygın bir profesyoneldim, burada ise basit bir metni anlamak için saatler harcayan bir öğrenci. Bu kimlik çatışması beni zorladı."

English translation:

"I attended a Russian language preparatory program, but academic Russian is very different and complex, and I feel unsuccessful. That sentence was like a summary of my first year. Prep was enough for everyday communication, but it did not prepare me at all for the language of abstract concepts and theoretical discussions in the social sciences… The hardest part was 'feeling unsuccessful.' In Turkey, I was a respected professional; here, I was a student spending hours trying to understand a simple text. This identity conflict was difficult for me."