

7 Seeing the Unseen: Representations of Being and Feeling in Plurilingual International Students' Adjustment Experiences

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1 Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, the global landscape of international higher education has been impacted by significant political and cultural changes. The flows of international student mobility have shifted in response to these changes, including those informed by the presidency of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, and more recently, the coronavirus pandemic, from which strong sentiments of nationalism, neo-racism and xenophobia have propagated (Weimer & Barlete, 2020). Such trends have complexified the experiences of international students, particularly racialised, plurilingual international students from the Global South, within a space already historically marked by unequal power relations and divisive hierarchies. Considering that discourses and images of deficit have been traditionally associated with international students in higher education (Tavares, 2021a), the current political and cultural environment – both within and outside academia – has only amplified the structural challenges that international students tend to face as a categorical group.

This chapter contributes to the need to understand the experiences of international students from a more critical and emic perspective. It focuses on the domain of sociocultural adjustment, a 'site' of many intersecting structural and individual challenges for international students with respect to linguistic and cultural differences. Through a qualitative design, conceptualised through the lens of ethnography-oriented portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), this chapter considers the experiences of three plurilingual international students at a Canadian university.

Photographs provided by the students are included in an attempt to enhance the representation of students' experiences in Canada, a geopolitical context often recognised for its welcoming, safe and multicultural environment for international students that has gained prominence in the last decade (Tavares, 2021b). This investigation is guided by the following questions: How did the international students experience their sociocultural adjustment at the university? How do photographs help represent the feelings and experiences of the students? The chapter begins by discussing sociocultural adjustment from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Subsequently, the methodology of the chapter is presented. The discussion of findings is meant to inform teaching, research, and support of plurilingual international students.

This chapter is conceptually situated in notions, discussions and movements toward social justice as presented in the introductory chapter of the book. Following the discussion by the editors of this book (see Introduction to this volume), this chapter conceives of social justice as a contextual process-goal that originates with each individual's own story and voice and that has the potential to confront systems of marginalisation. Yet, even though social justice here may be first seen as *local*, it is inextricably connected to the global, for social experiences, particularly in higher education, do not transpire in a vacuum, and consequently have the power to influence institutional policies and practices on both national and international levels. For Kayi-Aydar (2022: 150), social justice in education can only be achieved when 'diverse (cultural) identities are recognized, accepted, and appreciated'. This chapter works toward such a goal by critically and creatively exploring the diverse and complex experiences of plurilingual international students, which are often obscured by the political label of 'international student' (Tavares, 2021c). By focusing on plurilingual international students' experiences of sociocultural adjustment, this chapter foregrounds moments of critical thinking, feeling and acting, through which the students (attempt to) reconstruct their stories with language and education.

2 Background to the Study: Sociocultural Adjustment of International Students in Higher Education

The experiences of adjustment of plurilingual international students in institutions of higher education and their host communities remains a central area of concern for international and higher education scholarship. Schartner and Young (2016) have identified three domains in which the adjustment of international students occurs: the psychological, academic and sociocultural. This chapter is concerned with the social and cultural experiences of international students at the institutional and the host society levels. As such, it focuses on the sociocultural domain of adjustment, which can be understood as the 'cognitive and behavioural

factors associated with effective performance in the host country, such as the ability to “fit in” and interact successfully with others’ (Schartner & Young, 2016: 374). Experiences of adjustment may be explored and represented through qualitative approaches to research (Schartner & Young, 2016), as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Research has continuously demonstrated that sociocultural adjustment for international students is complex and multifactorial. In the context of English-medium institutions, one key factor for plurilingual international students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) is language proficiency (Sawir *et al.*, 2012). Proficiency in English is traditionally considered when academic adjustment is in focus as it is considered ‘crucial to academic success’ (Schartner & Young, 2016: 378). For instance, previous research has shown that academic adjustment and academic success go hand-in-hand with English language proficiency: higher levels of proficiency lead to higher levels of adjustment and success (Kukatlapalli *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2016). However, despite the emphasis on language proficiency, it is never the sole factor in play (Tavares, 2021b). Individual factors contribute to academic adjustment and so do structural factors that have to do with the institution as a whole (Phakiti *et al.*, 2013).

International students in English-medium higher education often speak EAL. These students have been traditionally categorised as English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers in comparison to those who speak English as a first language, or ‘native speakers’ of English. In this comparison, being a speaker of EAL is construed as an inferior position in light of native-speakerism, an ideology that positions the speaker of English as a first language as the best speaker of the language by virtue of having acquired the language at birth (Dewaele, 2018). Native-speakerism as an ideology, however, can only be sustained if important cognitive and sociocultural factors intertwined in individual language proficiency are dismissed (Slavkov *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, language ideologies tied to native-speakerism have not only remained prevalent in second and foreign language education, but have also permeated into higher education teaching and learning through the linguistic and political expansion of English.

International students of an EAL background can therefore encounter manifestations of native-speakerism in any or all domains of their academic studies. Whether in the curriculum, instruction, support services or interpersonal interaction (Tavares, 2022c), such representations of inferiority detrimentally impact how international students see themselves and are seen by the community. Even when language proficiency is not a barrier to sociocultural adjustment, the stereotypes assigned to being an EAL speaker – to being the *other* – can hinder the students’ adjustment because of their social consequences. In addition to strong images of deficit and lack, being an international student of an EAL background has been associated with passive behaviour, lower intelligence, uncritical thinking and

fragility (Fell & Lukianova, 2015; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020). International students of a racialised background are particularly vulnerable to such stereotypes as native-speakerism is also interlaced with issues of racial and ethnic discrimination (Tavares, 2022b).

A focus on the relationship between language and adjustment points to the urgency to (re)present language proficiency in English through the lens of plurilingualism. Plurilingual pedagogies focus on a 'holistic view of a speaker's plurilingual competence' (Prasad, 2020: 903) in which linguistic and cultural knowledges are not only integrated, regardless of 'proficiency levels *within and across* languages' (Chen *et al.*, 2022: 2, emphasis added), but also redefined as assets rather than deficits. Chen *et al.* (2022) explain that plurilingualism 'validates the long existing social phenomenon of flexible language use as documented in many parts of the world' and makes space in the traditional English language classroom to fuse the 'social realities [of learners] and language teaching and learning' (2). International students' very experiences of plurality (with)in language help confront the ideologies which impact their language use and sense of identity; however, higher education and language education generally do not take into account the students' social realities when designing curricula, teaching and learning.

Despite this structural gap, it is important to approach international students' experiences from a perspective of agency. Such a stance contributes to our understanding of how international students' behaviour challenges discourses, attitudes and perceptions grounded in a deficit view. International student agency can be complex, being 'revealed through how they [international students] think they are expected to respond ... and how they personally want to respond' to the challenges around them (Tran & Vu, 2018: 168). Since international students' behaviours are informed by and responsive to the sociocultural context in which they are embedded, agency is enacted in context. In the classroom, silence was largely discussed as a sign of insufficient language proficiency, while now it may be seen as a form of resistance to (expected) participation (Skinnari, 2014). Agency is not enacted only at the individual level (Tran & Vu, 2018). Structural issues in higher education that affect international students as a categorical group also result in collective agency, such as campus protests, signature-gathering, and involvement in the news (Tavares, 2021a).

Within the sociocultural domain, the level of adjustment of international students is dependent on social interaction and support. Social connections specifically with local students are important as these lead international students to experience 'higher levels of satisfaction, contentment, and significantly lower levels of homesickness' (Hendrickson *et al.*, 2011: 290). Socialisation with local students fulfils multiple purposes for international students, such as 'reducing feelings of loneliness and homesickness and increasing a sense of satisfaction with the international experience' (Arthur, 2017: 891). However, international and local students may

approach socialisation differently based on their positioning in the host community. For instance, local students tend to have social networks already established, while international students do not (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Although studying in university for the first time is a novel experience for all students, the availability of a support and emotional network already in place can influence how much students may invest in new friendships (Tavares, 2021b).

The differentiated institutional positioning between local and international students exists within a dichotomy in which being international is a marked position. The local culture and language are maintained as the ‘standard’ ones, to which international students are not only compared to, but also expected to embody (Tavares, 2022a). This dichotomy – local or international – is one mechanism by which international students may be othered or marginalised (Anderson, 2019; Arthur, 2017). Neo-racism has been conceptually employed to illustrate and problematise the multiple ways in which cultural and linguistic ideologies fuel marginalisation towards international students (Lee & Rice, 2007). Discrimination can be implicit or explicit; however, it is not based on race alone, but rather the hierarchy of cultures and languages. In this sense, some cultural behaviours are seen as superior to others, and in the name of maintaining ‘good cultural traditions’, international students’ behaviour, dress code, accent and other customs are targeted. Lee and Rice (2007) explain that:

Discrimination becomes, seemingly, justified by cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone and can thus disarm the fight against racism by appealing to ‘natural’ tendencies to preserve group cultural identity – in this case the dominant group. Underlying neo-racism are notions of cultural or national superiority and an increasing rationale for marginalizing or assimilating groups in a globalizing world. Neo-racism does *not* replace biological racism but rather masks it by encouraging exclusion based on the cultural attributes or national origin of the oppressed. (2007: 389, italics in original)

Neo-racism directly interferes with international students’ experiences of sociocultural adjustment. Since the local culture remains elevated, international students who maintain their cultural traditions may be marginalised and criticised for ‘failing’ to integrate by means of adopting the way of being of the local culture (Wei & Bunjun, 2021). Within this social context characterised by unequal power relations, monoculturalism is still favoured, despite discourses that, on the surface, acknowledge the importance of diversity for the community and institution. Based on the hierarchy of cultures and languages, international students who form stronger bonds with co-nationals, through which the students may find stronger emotional support, are often criticised for supposedly hindering their own adjustment (Tavares, 2021b). Successful adjustment is therefore framed as being like a local student and surrendering one’s own cultural and linguistic identities.

Experiences navigated within the process of sociocultural adjustment can evoke a range of possible emotional responses in international students. Despite the excitement associated with studying abroad, international students are known to face potential issues of loneliness and homesickness. Lack of opportunities to socialise with other students consistently and meaningfully can significantly impact the ways in which international students experience their stay abroad, and maintain their mental and physical well-being. Lack of socialisation can also interfere with their academic performance (Bek, 2017). Walsworth *et al.* (2021) have shown that friendships with local students are essential for international students to feel satisfied, even if such friendships are based on ‘weak’ ties. Although many international students may find socialisation opportunities within their co-national peer groups, such bonds do not always offer the same sense of satisfaction and inclusion that international students gain from socialisation with local students (Xing & Bolden, 2021). Hence the importance of institutional support in connecting international and local students both within and outside the classroom (Ammigan, 2019).

Despite the availability of support services, not all international students resort to these as they cope with their emotional challenges. In a recent study, Wawera and McCamley (2020: para. 43) found that international students experiencing loneliness ‘would first isolate themselves, staying at home and doing something comforting, followed by talking to close family members and friends back home’. The use of institutional support services was a later choice by the students, taken up once the students felt better. The students who took part in the services reported finding them helpful. For those international students who did not engage in such services, the format in which the services were offered (e.g. large groups, less personalised) was identified as intimidating, and thus a barrier, for students who did not know anybody else to attend with. Because emotional challenges can emerge at any point during an international student’s journey, Warera and McCamley (2020) have argued that universities need to better inform international students about these occurrences and the resources available to deal with them.

3 Research Methodology

The study on which this chapter is based took a qualitative orientation anchored in portraiture. Pioneered by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), portraiture is an ethnographic approach to research that is also concerned with the meanings people ascribe to their lived experiences within a particular cultural context. As discussed previously, the experiences of plurilingual international students who speak English as an additional language have been heavily influenced by discourses and attitudes stemming from language ideologies. Portraiture has as one of its main

goals to find and document goodness and success in participants. In exploring participant experiences, challenges and issues are also considered, but not made the priority. Another feature of portraiture is its attempt to bring science and art together. The standards of qualitative research are adhered to from data collection to analysis. In presenting the findings, however, the portraitist pays attention to the aesthetic – the physical and social settings contextualising participant experiences – and includes textual depictions of it in the findings. The aim of doing so is to enter into dialogue with a broader audience that is not restricted to the scientific domain. Moreover, an attention to the aesthetic also seeks to offer a more evocative presentation of the research setting and participants. Thus, from a more holistic perspective, portraiture ‘guides the construction of a story and then relates the story to its wider contexts in society and culture’ (Quigley *et al.*, 2015: 22). Portraiture has been mainly employed in education research, especially that with a social justice orientation. However, it has also been taken up in other fields, such as leadership development in higher education and arts curricula (e.g. Power & Klopfer, 2011; Raffoul *et al.*, 2020).

3.1 Participants

The research setting for the study was Star University, the pseudonym for a large, research-oriented university in Canada. According to the university’s webpage, about 6,000 international students were studying at the university at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The study began once research ethics approval was granted by the institution. An invitation to participate was shared with an international student group at the institution. Two criteria were in place: being an international student and a plurilingual speaker of English as an additional language. An international student was defined as having a study permit and being enrolled in an academic program at Star University for at least one semester. In this chapter, the experiences of three students are shared. Working with three students meant that their experiences could be explored in more detail (Creswell & Poth, 2016) given the time constraints and the volume of data gathered in this project (Leavy, 2017).

All identifiable information related to the participants has been pseudonymised. The participants were: Celine, a 19-year-old student from France enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in international studies; Fernando, a 22-year-old student from Colombia enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts in criminology; and Lee, a 24-year-old student from Macau enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts in linguistics. Fernando had been a student at Star University for three and a half years at the time of the study. The other two students had spent four months there. These students were chosen in order to increase representativity in research on international students, since their countries of origin were not the majority groups at Star

University, such as China, Korea and India. The findings presented do not reflect the experiences of the overall international student population at Star University and are meant to generate a contextualised and rich understanding of the three participants only.

3.2 Data collection

This study drew on interviews and photographs to explore students' experiences of sociocultural adjustment. Four semi-structured interviews were recorded with each participant over the course of one academic semester, each interview lasting about 60 minutes on average. The interview questions were informed by the themes, issues and concerns identified in the review of literature. Questions touched upon the topics of language learning, social life, academics, and the emotional responses to the experiences the students encountered. The interviews afforded me, as the researcher, the opportunity to understand the students' experiences more deeply in interaction with the students. Considering that interviewing is a social practice influenced by time, place and positioning, the content shared by the students should be seen as accounts of experience.

Photographs complemented the interviews as a way of documenting and representing lived experience. Photographic and interview data were collected simultaneously. An approach of participatory photography was employed, which is 'a visual method in which research participants are encouraged to visually document their social landscapes through photography' (Allen, 2012: 443). Asking participants to collect data on their own through photographs holds the potential to empower them in their choice of what to share with the researcher, in addition to inviting them to be co-researchers (Leavy, 2017). The students were instructed to document representations of experience connected to their sociocultural adjustment, such as a particular place, event, activity or object that held meaning for them. Instructions were broad in order to avoid giving the students an idea of what should be documented (Allen, 2012). As for the number, the expectation was that the students would share one photograph weekly by email over the course of four months.

3.3 Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the content from the transcribed interviews. Thematic analysis is concerned with 'collective or shared meaning and experiences' (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 57). In this study, shared meanings and experiences were analysed in relation to the umbrella category of sociocultural adjustment. Each line of the transcribed content was coded descriptively. The codes were organised into themes which were, in turn, expanded through comments in order to define 'what is unique and specific about each theme' (Braun & Clarke,

2012: 66). The themes were considered from two perspectives: individual (i.e. being unique to a participant) and collective. Individual themes were used to help craft a 'profile' for each participant, and consequently, a narrative that departed from the collective themes, but was further contextualised with individual ones. In each narrative, thick descriptions are presented along with verbatim content in English from the transcribed interviews as a way to establish trustworthiness (Loh, 2013).

A semiotic approach was employed to analyse the photographs. Due to the ethical concern of ensuring participant anonymity and right to privacy, participants were asked to provide photographs of places and things only. A consequence of this choice was that participants' ability to self-express more freely might have been limited. However, it was indispensable that no identifying information was made available. By the end of the study, 16 photos had been shared, on average, by each participant. A semiotic approach was appropriate because it considers 'two fundamental questions: the question of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the "hidden meanings" of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?)' (Van Leeuwen, 2004: 92). Thus, understanding possible meanings of an image entailed an analysis of two layers through the processes of denotation and connotation.

Denotation involves describing what the image shows, though an attention to its surrounding context is important (Van Leeuwen, 2004). The context may be singular or plural – in other words, it may evoke one or multiple interpretations by the viewer. Conversely, connotation is about the possible ideas and values represented when one considers people, places and things, and what meanings these stand for. Connotation considers meanings to be broad and ideological, for instance, when representations are supposed to be taken 'objectively' to show how things are in the 'real' world. As such, photographs can also imply different meanings. Implying can be done by styling the photograph. The colour, angle, lighting, focus, distance, shadows and framing of a photograph can be used to either show or hide a possible meaning. Because photographs can be edited easily today, styling can take place (intentionally) at the moment of capture or afterwards, through editing.

The analyses of interviews and photographs were triangulated in order to strengthen the interpretation of the data. Triangulation can be seen as 'the combination of two or more data sources, investigators, methodologic approaches, theoretical perspectives or analytical methods within the same study' (Thurmond, 2001: 253). The choice of which photographs to include was based on their degree of connection to the themes identified from the process of data analysis. Quality was also another factor in the selection of photographs. While all photographs were used for analysis, only those whose resolution and clearness were adequate were included in the next section. Since data collection and analysis took

place concurrently, as the researcher I was able to discuss the participants' meanings and intentions behind the photographs in relation to mine in subsequent interviews in order to enhance my analysis.

4 Findings

This section presents the *portraits* of the three participants. It is important to note that the portraits aim to provide a rich and contextualised description of each student's experience, though portraits, as creative narratives combining science and art (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), do not embody the format of a more traditional qualitative study grounded in thematic analysis where descriptions follow repeatedly from isolated excerpts (e.g. Quigley *et al.*, 2015). However, in doing so, each portrait will naturally generate new questions, some of which cannot be answered given the scope and word limit of the chapter. The epistemological claims advanced in the portraits are a product of a *holistic* analytical engagement with the data (i.e. four hours of interviews with each participant along with approximately 16 photographs supplied by each participant). The claims should therefore not be seen as a result of an analysis only of the quotes or photographs presented in the portraits, which are included rather to illustrate and contextualise important, but specific moments of each student's overall experience.

4.1 Celine: Encounters with loneliness and solitude

Inspired by an idealised view of studying abroad, Celine expected to have a socially eventful and academically fulfilling experience at Star University. In France, she learned about studying in Canada from Canadian recruiters who travelled through French high schools to promote Star University. The vision of studying in Canada disseminated by the recruiters was one in which international students were presented as being actively surrounded by new friends and involved in exciting, appealing social activities. Recruitment brochures showed photographs of international students of diverse backgrounds together, who appeared cheerful with smiles on their faces under sunny skies. This was the very scenario which Celine imagined herself in once she made the choice to study at Star University. However, she encountered the complete opposite during her time at the university, particularly in her first semester.

Despite multiple attempts at socialising, Celine found herself mostly alone. In the first month, she looked for opportunities to connect with other students, both local and international, by turning to student clubs and associations on campus. However, these were mostly unavailable as the programming for social activities on campus was given a late start into September. Indeed, Celine had joined Star's smaller, bilingual campus, located in a residential area where little activity took place. The campus

looked inviting on the outside with its European-inspired architecture and lush green trees that changed colours in the autumn. Still, Celine experienced that most local students, who were either Francophone or bilingual, lived off campus and rarely frequented the premises beyond the bare minimum required – that is, coming for the purpose of attending classes. For her, the campus was a place of quietness and solitude.

In the first semester, Celine's main emotional state fluctuated between being bored and being lonely. Of course, at times these two states inter-mixed, culminating in deep-hearted feelings of frustration, irritation and disempowerment from being unable to change the situation and, simultaneously, from feeling so impacted by these feelings, despite trying to dispel them on a daily basis. 'It's really hard. Like at the beginning of the year in September, there was no association, no student clubs, because it's very lonely here, to start. So, I was very bored. It was hard', she expressed in sorrow. Inserted in this sociocultural configuration was (also) the fact that most of her peers spoke French as a first language. As such, Celine found few opportunities to practise her English consistently and naturalistically, since the lectures in English involved timed and structured interaction with peers. As the winter season reached its peak, Celine found herself even more isolated, spending hours in her dormitory room by herself.

Celine felt a profound, multifaceted distance from her academic community: physical, social and emotional (see Figure 7.1). She felt neglected by her institution at all levels. The campus was bilingual, but predominantly Francophone, and Celine felt as though the university had



Figure 7.1 A snapshot of solitude and loneliness (photo provided by the student)

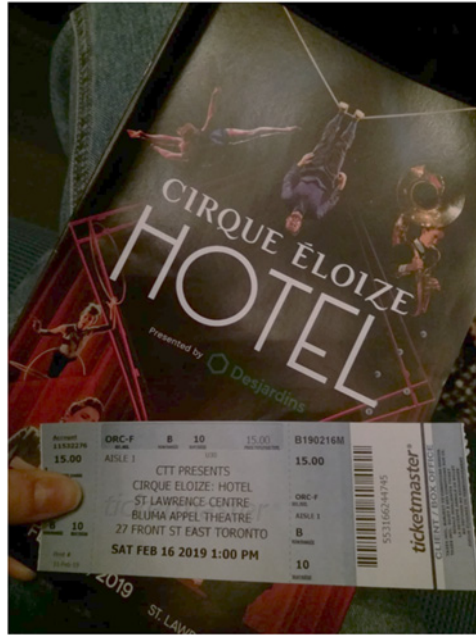


Figure 7.2 Inserting the self in social experiences (photo provided by the student)

forgotten about those who needed to develop their proficiency in English. Lacking meaningful social interaction, she turned to atypical ways to practise her English, such as in participating in research projects and volunteering in campus events. She understood her own needs for social interaction and devised plans to meet them, like going to the theatre (see Figure 7.2) and exhibitions downtown. However, these were always done on her own. The campus felt cold, physically, socially and emotionally. Gradually, the feeling of loneliness was such that it obscured the natural beauty of the campus. Her overall experience was far from what she had hoped for.

4.2 Fernando: Constructing an identity through English

Fernando's experiences of sociocultural adjustment revolved primarily around the English language. Fernando studied and lived on Star University's main campus, a vibrant and active space with dozens of restaurants and shops that were open during the day and night to the convenience of students residing on campus. The campus had direct access to the city's downtown through public transport, in addition to other attractions in the city, such as parks, shopping malls and museums that were located adjacent to many of the transit stations located between Star and the city centre. Fernando enjoyed socialising with other students,

most of whom were also plurilingual international students at Star living in residence on campus. In fact, Fernando's involvement in the international student group was such that he was viewed as a leader by many, since he initiated numerous social activities for the international students at Star.

Developing friendships with Canadian students had always been Fernando's initial hope as an international student at Star. He loved learning new languages, and when it came to further developing his proficiency in English, his hope was that Canadian students could offer him the best outcome in this regard. Yet this dream never materialised. In his view, Canadian students were not as interested in developing and maintaining intercultural relationships with international students. Although Fernando had gotten closer to some Canadian students who were also a part of his program as a result of frequent classroom contact, their interactions never extended beyond the boundaries of campus, which he then characterised as 'casual' friendships. He explained: 'My [Canadian] classmates, I think I told you, all of my [Canadian] classmates ... they don't make any friends, they just come to school and they go back home. That's it'.

Such an experience led him to re-conceptualise the role the campus played in his process of adjustment. The campus became first a social, rather than academic, place for him. He was particularly fond of going to restaurants with friends in the evenings (see Figure 7.3). Students living in residence organised social gatherings spontaneously on the first floor almost every night – a space designed for student entertainment. These events were points of contact for international students, bringing new and veteran students together informally and safely. Fernando explained why he chose to live on campus throughout his entire time at Star by focusing on its social aspect: 'I feel like you make friends, you feel like you are always with someone. So ... it's really fun, the campus at night, it's really fun'. Yet the emotional state of satisfaction and fulfilment came at a cost.

Fernando progressively constructed an identity for himself through English that, in his view, could not coexist with his Colombian identity. Speaking English was tied to a cosmopolitan and globalised identity, which brought him closer to international experiences and peers on campus. Conversely, he felt as though speaking Spanish had little social value and could only offer him a kind of social experience in connection with other speakers of Spanish, a language that was not as valued and recognised at Star in the same way that English was. He expressed: 'I feel like English is my life. I feel like it's my real life. And when I'm speaking Spanish, it's just like, *a side*. Like, my family and vacation and that's it. But like, my friends, like, everything to me now is English. So, I don't even think about making Spanish friends anymore'. In this sense, his adjustment depended largely on the English language, though this was not a neutral choice as English displaced parts of his identity.



Figure 7.3 Experiencing connectedness in sharing a meal with friends (photo provided by the student)

4.3 Lee: Longing for a social life

Prior to moving to Canada, Lee lived in California, where he attended college as an international student. Being on the west coast, he grew accustomed to warm and sunny weather almost all year round, which facilitated his access to outdoor opportunities he only rarely found while previously living in in-state New York, where he went to high school. Students at the college, both local and international, would often make their way to one of many local beaches to play sports, share a meal, and get to know one another after class. Although Lee was an international student, the novelty in the college experience, plus the informality with which he and his peers socialised, contributed to his social network developing quickly and effortlessly. He experienced a great sense of satisfaction from this lifestyle to such an extent that his academic studies gradually became less of a priority. The number of international students at the college was almost equal to that of local students. As a result, Lee felt like he belonged since the international student group was a prominent and diverse one.

Lee came to Canada shortly before his student visa expired in the United States. The choice of Canada was influenced primarily by the fact that his best friend, whom he met at the college, was also moving to Canada to continue his studies. The ease with which the logistical part of his move unfolded, especially as in obtaining a student visa for Canada and transferring his credits to Star University, contrasted sharply with his sociocultural adjustment. For Lee, the new Canadian city had a fast, business-oriented pace, and an uninviting, solemn character reflected off the grey buildings and cloudy skies (see Figure 7.4). More noticeable, though, was for him the experienced unfriendly and boring personality of local Canadians, who seemed uninterested in new friendships, unlike the locals he met formerly in California. When the winter came, Lee felt the greatest impact on his social life and emotional well-being. He struggled to adapt to the cold, snowy and windy days of the new environment. The more the winter days progressed, the more he felt isolated, alone, and melancholy when comparing his previous life in California (see Figure 7.5).

His growing feeling of unhappiness and dissatisfaction affected every aspect of his experience in Canada. He began to dislike the city, the university, the people and the weather. He also felt frustrated by the reticence embodied by his peers at Star University every time he attempted to interact with them. He shared: ‘first day in class, they’re [local students] fairly strict. I can see their face that maybe they’re not saying something. “You’re asking too much questions”, something like that. But in Cali ... you would



Figure 7.4 A blurry prospect (photo provided by the student)



Figure 7.5 An outsider's perspective (photo provided by the student)

just like, we can hang out right after this class, even the first day we met'. Against this backdrop, California and Canada existed in a dichotomy: California was good and fun, while Canada was bad and tedious. Because opportunities to socialise with local students were difficult to find and maintain, Lee felt as though he had been denied the chance to be fully himself. He was gregarious, curious and outgoing, but could not act upon these traits in the same natural way he did in California.

By the time I met Lee, his dissatisfaction was such that he confessed, though jokingly, that moving to Canada was a mistake. 'I'm kind of more like a[n] outgoing person. When I was in New York, people were more like, sort of checked out, just not as open as like, in the west coast. You can easy make friends [on the west coast], very easily. Yeah, and people just less judge [you]. That's why. The weather is always so nice. Actually, I miss it so much', was the summary for the reasons why. Indeed, multiple factors contributed to Lee's overall feeling of estrangement: the culture, weather, his linguistic profile, and the ways in which multiculturalism was experienced contrastingly in California and in that region of Canada. Following the winter season, spring brought life back to the city; still, Lee found himself mostly alone. His dog had become his companion on a number of daily activities he engaged in to pass time and explore his surroundings. Lee had one more term to complete before concluding his studies at Star, but he had already decided, at least for the time being, that returning to Macau would be the best thing to do for himself.

5 Lessons Learnt

This chapter explored the experiences of sociocultural adjustment of plurilingual international students at a Canadian university. The findings represent, both textually and photographically, a glimpse of each student's broader journey at Star University. All three students considered socialisation with local students central to feeling included and appreciated in the host environment. Walsworth *et al.* (2021) showed that even superficial friendships with local students have a meaningful role to play in the extent to which international students feel satisfied. However, all students experienced local students as generally uninterested in intercultural friendships. Though disinterest was not the sole factor behind the lack of interaction and friendship with local students, it was one with the greatest impact on the international students' experiences of adjustment. As a result, the students sought out different, but not necessarily equally fulfilling, opportunities to meet some of their social and emotional needs. These opportunities included investing more in socialisation with other international students as well as participating in local events, typically alone.

From the students' point of view, language proficiency was not tied to the outcomes of their attempts and investments into socialising with local students. In fact, Celine spoke French, one of the official languages of Star's smaller campus, but still found it difficult to connect with local students. While Fernando enjoyed a socially active and satisfying life, it was one that transpired only in the presence of other plurilingual international students. These findings point to a difference between how local and international students envision intercultural relationships with one another. One reason behind such differences may be related to the fact that local students tend to have pre-existing and well-established friendships from previous socialisation (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Another factor is the sociocultural and physical set-up of campus, which also plays a role in how social opportunities are created for both groups (Arthur, 2017). Celine's stay at a small, suburban campus offered considerably less opportunity for her to connect with local students, while Fernando, living and studying on Star's university main campus, experienced it as a site of many social possibilities.

The students' photographs open a window into the emotional side of their experiences of sociocultural adjustment. Celine's and Lee's photographs depict places and things that correspond primarily with feelings of despondency, isolation and loneliness. For example, the empty bench (Celine), the view of a campus building from a distance surrounded by snow (Celine and Lee), and the grey skies over the city buildings (Lee) depict experiences, perceptions and feelings related to or reflective of hardship, struggle and affliction. On the contrary, Fernando's photograph illustrates the sharing of a meal at a restaurant, a social event which

occurred in interaction with his peers. Although only one of Fernando's photographs is included, all of his photographs reflected themes of a positive sociocultural adjustment. Thus, photographs help us visualise, recognise and identify, from a student perspective, a diversity of experiences of sociocultural adjustment.

From a social justice perspective, the students' experiences reinforce the need for structural reform in higher education to promote equity for international students. At Star University, discourses celebrating diversity were prevalent. Campus events designed to celebrate international students' cultures, especially through the selling and tasting of ethnic food, were common. However, materialisations of such discourses to an extent that they empowered students in the community and challenged the status quo were absent from the students' experiences. In higher education, neo-liberal frameworks recognise the importance of diversity, but do not engage with issues of social justice to disrupt the hierarchical fabric of institutions that privilege local, Western forms of knowledge and language (Kubota, 2015). In the classroom, instructors need to teach through a pedagogy that leads students to reflexivity, critical awareness and better cross-cultural understanding as these are beneficial to all students, but especially to local students.

The findings have direct implications for language and content instructors in institutions of higher education. The classroom continues to be a site where productive opportunities to facilitate intercultural socialisation between international and local students can be found. An internationalised curriculum with inclusive and diverse teaching and learning methods are starting points for instructors to plan and initiate inter-group collaboration. Instructors can take the lead in grouping students for collaborative work, rather than leaving the choice up to students themselves, who often self-select into groups based on familiarity (Trahar & Hyland, 2011). Additionally, a pedagogy that invites and recognises international students' cultural and linguistic skills as assets is important, but insufficient if it does not lead local students to critically reflect on their own culture toward change. Lastly, it is pivotal that universities provide meaningful and responsive support for international students. This includes emotional, social and academic support with initiatives that involve students from the very beginning of their studies, rather than only when challenges become such that they hinder the mental well-being and academic performance of international students.

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