Localizing the Global: Examining International Students' Perceptions of Communication in the Classroom

Miranda Behrends

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of International Studies

University of Washington

2024

Committee:

Stephen Meyers

Jason Johnson

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

The Jackson School of International Studies

University of Washington

Abstract

Localizing the Global: Examining International Students' Perceptions of Communication in the Classroom

Miranda Behrends

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Stephen Meyers

Department of Law, Societies, and Justice at the Jackson School of International Studies

International students are becoming an increasingly important population of the American institution, but support for these students' academic experiences is still lacking despite the unique communication-related challenges many face. English language ability has been the main focus of many studies aimed at improving the experience of international students. This study instead understands English proficiency as one component of communication ability and examines how international students' confidence in their own communication skills shapes and is shaped by their experiences in the classroom. Using semi-structured interview data from seven University of Washington students, this research finds that while English ability is an important factor in the class experience of many students, it is just one component of successful

communication. Other factors, such as confidence, personality, and cultural background, may exist as additional barriers that must be acknowledged to ensure a positive learning experience for international students.

The incoming internationalization of US education has been trending upward for the past few decades and shows few signs of stopping. According to the 2023 Institute of International Education (IIE) Open Doors Report (2023), the number of international students in the United States increased each year since the 2006/07 academic year and only declined starting in 2019/20 with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Despite the dramatic drop in the following year, this number nearly approached pre-pandemic levels in 2023. This suggests that even with the lingering barriers to international travel, students are still interested in experiencing education in the US.

The importance of international students to the US can be seen on an institutional and national level. NAFSA reported that international students contributed 40.1 billion dollars to the US economy in 2022/23 (“NAFSA Economic Tool,” n.d.). With about 62 percent of international students receiving most of their funds from countries other than the United States (“International Students,” 2019), international students have become a significant source of funding for American institutions. Given the steady decline in government funding for American higher education over the last decade (dropping by $6.6 billion between 2008 and 2018), this means that international student tuition is becoming a more and more valuable resource for US institutions (Brennan & Dellow, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2019). These institutions have more incentive than ever to understand the experiences of international students in order to increase retention.

This upward trend of global education is not without its reasons. Technology has made it easier than ever to seek opportunities abroad, including education. As the globe

shrinks further and further, going abroad for higher education is more accessible than ever–a reality reflected in IIE's yearly reports.

This steady increase makes even more sense within the context of the wealth of research that has been done demonstrating the potential benefits of the international student experience. NAFSA reports that students who study abroad experience higher GPAs, improved intercultural understanding, and improved language learning skills ("Impact of Study Abroad," n.d). They were also found to have higher college completion rates (Bhatt et al., 2022) and employability ("Impact of Study Abroad," n.d.; Sisavath, 2021).

International students are not the only ones who benefit from cross-cultural interaction; introducing international perspectives into the classroom has been shown–when implemented correctly–to produce positive learning outcomes in general, suggesting that US domestic students may also benefit from international students' presence. A number of studies have shown the advantages of integrating the perspectives of students from a variety of cultures into classroom learning (Jiali & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Gay, 2013; Lehtomäki et al., 2016). Dauber and Spencer-Oatey (2023) also note that as global communication skills have become highly sought-after by employers, students who have been offered opportunities for cross-cultural exchange are found to have the upper hand.

Despite these findings suggesting that international students have become integral members of the American student body, they are often left unsupported and the unique challenges of being an international student unrecognized–especially within their courses. A growing body of research has begun to explore the challenges international

students face while transitioning to a foreign education style taught in a foreign language (Coertjens, 2016; Tozini, 2020), and already many colleges and universities are attempting to find new ways to support students in their courses.

Foreign language and communication skills have been found to be some of the most important aspects of achieving academic adjustment abroad. There has been some research focused on quantifiable measures of English language ability and communication ability, and the impact it has on US international student outcomes (Andrade, 2009; Schoepp & Garinger, 2016; Ghengesh, 2015). However, little has been done yet to understand students' perceptions of their own English ability and communication skills and how they believe this impacts their experiences in the classroom. Rather than trying to understand English ability as a predictor of students' academic success, this research seeks to understand the nexus between international students' assessments of their own communication ability and their experiences taking classes at UW. In order to understand how international students feel their ability to communicate in English-speaking classes shapes their overall experiences, semi-structured interviews with seven University of Washington students at various levels of post-secondary academic career were conducted.

While various terms have been used to describe the measurement of students' own evaluation of themself or their skills and experiences, this study will use "confidence" throughout to denote this concept. This distinguishes itself from similar terms like "self-efficacy," adopted by psychologist Albert Bandura to describe a person's belief that they have the ability to accomplish a given task (1977). Bandura explores the motivational quality of this concept, allowing it to be distinguished as a more situational,

goal-oriented form of self-confidence. One reason this study opts for the terms “confidence” and “self-confidence” is to make note of this distinction, in that the participants were not given a set goal against which to measure their abilities. Another reason is that these terms, as more commonly used and understood than phrases like “self-efficacy” or “self-concept,” were the descriptors the study’s participants gravitated towards when answering questions about their experiences. This was done in spite of the interview questions not using this terminology, instead asking participants to describe their feelings about their communication ability and how it relates to their classroom experiences.

This study also focuses specifically on the participants’ experiences of taking classes at UW, which includes but is not limited to the space of the classroom itself. The interview results from this study demonstrate that these students often use communication not just within a classroom context, but also in other spaces and times relevant to the course, such as when completing class assignments or when interacting with professors and peers outside of class. Therefore, a differentiation is made between the class itself and the space of the classroom.

This study begins by contextualizing the barriers related to communication that international students have been found to face in their courses. First it explores through a literature review the large yet inconclusive body of research relating English language ability to academia, then continues on to examine other ways that international students feel that their communication skills can impact their experience in their courses. It will then present and analyze the results of interviews with seven University of Washington

international students, followed by a discussion of the implications that emerge and directions for future research.

Confidence and English Language Ability

When it comes to students' self-confidence and their language-speaking ability, evidence largely supports a positive relationship between the two factors. A number of studies on various age groups have supported the theory that self-confidence has a significant relationship to language speaking ability (Aulia and Apoko, 2022; Gurler, 2015). Similarly, studies by Salem and Al Dyiar (2014) and Badrasawi et al. (2021) found that as students' speaking anxiety increased, their speaking fluency decreased. The significance of this relationship suggests that confidence may be an important factor that influences the class experiences of students who study and communicate in another language.

As with the relationship between self-concept and general academic success, however, many studies suggest that self-confidence or self-efficacy and language ability do not always have a direct relationship and take note of the potential presence of moderating factors. In a meta-analysis performed by Wang and Sun (2020), the authors suggest that the relationship is significant and cite a number of studies that have found external factors like motivation (Zhang & Guo, 2012) and cognition (Swanson et al., 2016) to be impactful. Most notably, cultural context is found to play a particularly large role, with studies done with East Asian participants having a stronger relationship between the two variables than those done with Western participants (Wang and Sun, 2020). Thus, the authors advocate for more recognition of cultural differences in

classes, such as more deliberate measures to create classroom environments for students from cultural contexts who might benefit from more encouraging feedback or recognition of success from instructors (Wang and Sun, 2020).

The significance of this relationship between self-confidence and English proficiency can be seen when applied to international students as well. A study by Telbis et al. (2014) identified four key areas of difficulty based on previous literature–community acceptance, language mastery, academic preparation, and financial issues–that international students might face that are thought to impact self-efficacy. By issuing a survey about students' experiences regarding these four areas to international students, the study concludes that these four issues not only remain valid concerns for today's foreign students, but they are also "significant enough to have a negative effect on the completion of studies." It can be presumed that there are a number of solutions–coming from both inside and outside the classroom–that could help international students have not only a more successful academic experience, but also a less stressful experience taking classes in general (Telbis et al., 2014).

Ahrari et al.'s (2019) study on the adjustment experiences of postgraduate international students in Malaysia uses interviews to demonstrate how students' perceptions of their English ability can affect other areas of the overall class experience–not just academic. Based on the data from students, they asserted three emerging themes of adjustment: academic adjustment, psychological adjustment, and socio-cultural adjustment. They found that some students felt that language difficulties contributed to an inability to connect with domestic peers and make friends, supporting previous studies that have argued that greater host language proficiency can help

students' socio-cultural adjustment (Ahrari et al., 2019). Another interviewee expressed their reluctance to even participate in class at all, stating "I couldn't speak English. So, I didn't go to class. It was very hard for me. I couldn't understand what people were talking and saying" (Ahrari et al., 2019). While the three themes the authors advocate provide a useful way of categorizing the types of problems international students face, the results show how these areas can become conflated and affect each other–especially in the unique environment of the classroom. As these results suggest, the social and academic spheres can overlap in a major way.

Self-Perception of Communication Skills

Though important, language is but one aspect of how students participate and interact in their classes. While international students' foreign language ability has recently become a large point of interest in international higher education, the topic of communication skills remains relatively unexplored. In their bibliometric and content analysis of literature on the topic of communication and international students' adaptation, Wilczewski and Alon (2022) do differentiate between language skills and communication skills, but describe them as "complementary." They cite Yu and Shen's (2012) study on predictors of cross-cultural adaptation by noting the way host-language proficiency enables communication within a class, suggesting that these two aspects of classroom interaction are often intertwined.

A student's confidence in their host language proficiency does not necessarily indicate confidence in their communication ability. Even if an international student does not perceive their English ability as an issue affecting their class experience, they may

find themselves struggling to communicate in other ways. For the Malaysian students from Ahrari et al.'s (2019) study, the social customs that encouraged them to be shy and polite might come across to other students as aloof. Other studies report students with difficulties understanding academic conventions, such as citing a work or avoiding plagiarism. Young and Schartner (2014) quote one such student who remarked, "…it was difficult because they tell you, you have to reflect and put your own ideas but at the same time you have to quote all the things you put." In other words, while a student may comprehend what the professor is saying in English, the professor's and student's expectations might not always be mutually communicated and understood. This occurrence is perhaps especially frequent for international students who, unlike domestic students, may not yet have been exposed to traditional American class formats.

The social aspect of the traditional American class may also oftentimes require a level of communication that some international students from certain cultural backgrounds are not accustomed to. One study, for instance, reported that "unfamiliarity with the learning environment could be met with cultural insensitivity from the class," as in the case of one student who was laughed at when they stood up to answer a question (Ravichandran, 2023). Miscommunications like these may incite further negative self-perceptions and anxiety about communicating in their courses–feelings that are a large obstacle in the academic culture of American higher education that tends to reward social participation like answering questions or speaking up during class (Smithee et al., 2004; "Classroom Culture in the United States," 2019; "Understanding US Classroom Culture," Montgomery College). Several studies also

note international students' difficulties when participating in group discussions or group work (Ahrari et al., 2019; Ravichandran, 2023), which is another notable feature of US higher education classroom culture ("Classroom Culture in the United States," 2019; "Understanding US Classroom Culture," Montgomery College). While there may be a language-speaking aspect to this trend, this may additionally be due to miscommunication or a lack of cultural understanding about the role of the student in the American classroom.

Finally, this study uses Zappa-Hollman and Duff's (2015) theory of Individual Networks of Practice (INoP), as a way of understanding how the social practices international students are enmeshed in can shape their classroom experiences to a large degree. INoP theory takes students' acts of socialization outside of the strict boundaries of the classroom to describe how the individuals and communities they interact with form a network that supports their L2 learning. By analyzing the social networks of three Mexican students studying at an English-speaking university, Zappa-Hollman and Duff demonstrate that having a strong network in which to engage in social practices can have tremendous implications for their academic development and acculturation. This lens is particularly relevant to the current study, which aims to understand how students perceive this intersection of their social and academic experiences in their classes.

Overall, while there is a growing body of literature on topics like host language proficiency or international students' acculturation difficulties, specific research on the relationship between students' communication ability–let alone their confidence in it–and positive class experiences is lacking. As Wilczewski and Alon highlight, little

research has been done to examine the role of both language and communication in international student adjustment (2022). As part of a larger study by Zimmermann, (1995) a rating system was created based on international students' self-reported ability to be flexible in intercultural communication contexts. While this behavioral flexibility was found to be moderately correlated with communication ability, there was no significant relationship to adjustment to American culture (Zimmermann, 1995). This does not take into account the unique environment of the classroom, however, nor does it specifically measure the direct relationship between students' perceptions of their communication ability and adjustment. To better understand the implications of encouraging international students' to develop more positive ideas about their communication and language skills, this research aims to fill this gap in the literature.

Research Methodology

A qualitative study was used in order to gain an in-depth and reflective understanding of participants' self-described communication ability and experiences taking American courses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the participants to explore the topics important to them while maintaining a focus on the specific experience of taking courses. The guiding prompts were also useful for identifying overarching themes, as well as the notable contrasts between participants' experiences.

A total of one undergraduate student and six graduate students participated in the study. An initial wave of five participants was selected, primarily through the researcher's personal contacts. Snowball sampling was then used in order to fill in some of the demographic gaps that emerged from the original sample.

The participating students represented a variety of home countries. Of the seven participants, three were from East Asia, one from South America, one from the Middle East, one from South East Asia, and one from Europe. According to the University of Washington's International Student Services' statistical webpage, the number of international students during the Autumn 2023-24 quarter totaled 7,686, which included students with F1/F2, J1/J2 and other Visa types. The participants accounted for many of the major regions, skewed slightly to reflect the approximate 60% of East Asian students that make up the University of Washington's international student population. Participants also had vastly different levels of previous experience with American class culture and the English language, which can be seen from the variety of experiences and perspectives that are reflected in the findings.

Other aspects of the sample demographics, such as gender identity and class standing, were less representative. With undergrad students representing nearly 70% of UW's student population, findings may reflect experiences more representative of graduate students ("Fast Facts," 2024). Similarly, six participants identified as female while only one identified as male "International Student Statistics," 2024). The 2021 SEVIS by the Numbers Report, published by the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, reports female international student enrollment in Bachelor's or Master's degree programs as 44% ("SEVIS by the Numbers," 2021). Further research on the experiences of male students may allow for a more thorough understanding of international student trends. A table detailing the participant demographics is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant demographics

Name (pseudonym)	Gender Identity	Class Standing	Home Region	Department
Aaliyah	F	Graduate	Middle East	International Studies
Emily	F	Graduate	East Asia	Japanese
Christina	F	Graduate	East Asia	Biology
Matilda	F	Graduate	Europe	German
Dylan	M	Undergraduate, Fourth-year	Southeast Asia	Computer Science
Ana	F	Graduate	South America	International Studies
Katy	F	Graduate	East Asia	Education Policy

The participants offered a variety of reactions when asked how they felt about their English communication skills, which was often related to their background. While Aaliyah and Dylan had had considerable prior experience speaking English and taking American classes and felt very confident in their English, Ana, Katy, Christina, and Emily had not had the same exposure and expressed less confidence. Matilda expressed confidence in her English language ability but often focused her answers on her difficulties understanding social aspects of the class, perhaps reflecting her background studying English in a non-American classroom.

Interviews were conducted in person by the researcher during the 2024 winter quarter. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to upwards of an hour, and all interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed afterward. The interviews were all conducted in English, and involved topics like participants' background, expected versus actual class experiences, perceptions of how their identity has shaped their class

experience, and perceptions of peer and professor interactions. A sample list of prepared interview questions is provided in Appendix A.

Analysis

Upon conducting an analysis of the participants' responses to the set of guided interview questions, a list of four common themes emerged: classroom format, academic expectations, peer interactions, and professor interactions. The Classroom Format section will detail participants' communication within the classroom itself during discussions and activities, Academic Expectations will recount their perceived ability to understand and complete assignments, and Peer Interactions and Professor Interactions sections will discuss participants' experiences communicating with peers and professors in their courses, respectively.

A small description of each participants' background, as well as their self-described comfort level of using English, is provided below. While these descriptions by no means capture the full unique and vibrant backgrounds the participants recounted, this study's aim is to provide some insight into the context that has shaped the participants' experiences while demonstrating how vastly different each international student's life can look.

Aaliyah, an International Studies graduate student from the Middle East, grew up taking classes in a British-style international school in her country. While her home country's language was her native language, she grew up speaking English during her formative years and felt confident that she could now use it at native proficiency. She attended a branch of an American university in her home country for her undergraduate

education, and was able to take classes with other American students while studying abroad in Europe. A major reason she chose to study at UW was her familiarity with the American class culture.

Emily, a Japanese Language graduate student from East Asia, attended undergraduate school in her home country and briefly studied abroad in Japan before coming to UW for her Master's degree. She took some English classes in her home country, but did not feel confident speaking it after coming to the US. She came to the US at her parents' urging, and with the hopes of getting a degree from a prestigious university and finding a good job.

Christina, a Biology graduate student from East Asia, came to the US after acquiring her Bachelor's degree and launching her career in public health in her home country. Her parents met in the US and lived there for several years before she was born, and she came to the US with a strong personal connection to her parents' experiences. Despite this, she explained that she did not have a lot of experience speaking English and was still struggling to feel confident speaking it.

Matilda, a Pedagogy and Culture graduate student from Europe, acquired her Bachelor's degree in English as a Foreign Language in her home country before coming to UW to teach her home country's language. As a part of her teaching exchange program, she began taking classes at UW before deciding to enroll full time in addition to her teaching responsibilities. She also found herself interested in American culture, and felt that the teaching exchange program would be a good way to experience the US. Due to her undergraduate degree, Matilda felt quite comfortable using English, especially after finishing the first year of her graduate degree.

Dylan, a fourth-year undergraduate Computer Science student, was born in Eastern Europe but moved to his parents home country in Southeast Asia when he was two. He grew up speaking his parent's home language, and took British-style classes until he came to the US as an exchange student at age 16. He enrolled in undergraduate school in order to find a good-paying tech job, and felt that his background studying in America allowed him to adjust quickly after his freshman year. After his first year of adjustment, he did not feel significant difficulties communicating.

Ana, an International Studies graduate student, decided to come to the US to be closer to her sister and to get her Bachelor's degree in sociology. She had taken some English classes in high school, but did not feel confident in her communication after moving to the US. Upon entering graduate school, she still often felt like her English was "not good enough" and found it difficult to communicate with American students and professors.

Katy, an Education Policy graduate student from East Asia, came to the US with a Bachelor's in her field and several years of working experience under her belt in order to continue her education and travel. While she did have some experience taking English classes in her home country, she still felt moments of speaking anxiety–especially in the classroom–that prompted her to avoid using it in certain situations.

Like most US institutions, the University of Washington has a minimum English proficiency requirement for international students that is to be submitted when applying. English proficiency is typically scored through the TOEFL, IELTS or Duolingo English Test (DET). Created by the US-based company ETS, the TOEFL exam is most widely

used within the US, and has a mean total score of 88 on a 120-point scale (“TOEFL iBT Test and Score Data Summary 2022,” 2023). According to the University of Washington’s admissions website, the minimum score for consideration at UW is 76 (“English Proficiency,” n.d.). By using ETS’s performance descriptor guide, this score reflects an average of low- to high-intermediate level of proficiency across the four TOEFL testing categories of reading, speaking, listening, and writing (“Performance Descriptors for the TOEFL iBT Test,” 2021). The reported average score of UW students is significantly higher at 105, however, which suggests an average level of advanced across the four testing categories. This high mean score does not necessarily mean that UW students will have no issues communicating during their classes, however, as the following participant reports show.

Classroom Format

This section discusses participants’ thoughts on the classroom style and structure of their University of Washington classes, which proved a key point of adjustment for many of the participants. For my definition of classroom format, this involves aspects of the classroom itself, like the learning environment–whether in-person or virtual–learning activities, and teaching style. As opposed to the category of academic expectations, which will be discussed later and involves topics like completing and succeeding on assignments, this category focuses on how the participants felt about their ability to participate and engage in the actual lecture portion of the class.

Participants exhibited a wide range of opinions about the styles of the classes they had taken at UW thus far. Based on the interviews, the highlights of their classes

included freedom of expression and diversity of perspectives, although even this point faced some contention. The most challenging area for many participants was the strong emphasis on discussion and forming one's own opinions, which could make even the participants who expressed the most confidence in their English communication ability feel discomfort.

When asked about the differences between their previous experiences studying in an American classroom and in a non-American classroom, as well as between their experiences and previous expectations of the American classroom, several pointed to freedom of expression as a difference that they particularly enjoyed about classes at UW. Christina explained that she was initially intimidated by the expectation from many professors that students be able to formulate their own opinion about a topic and discuss it in front of the class. She expressed low confidence in her English speaking skills, though she felt that they had grown throughout her year and a half at UW. During her first year in particular, she experienced anxiety about being able to translate her thoughts into English or saying something that would appear impolite or offend her classmates. As she grew more confident in her English speaking ability during the second year of her Master's program, she began to appreciate the way her classes encouraged students to share their perspectives. Hearing peers share their opinions also gave Christina more time to formulate her own opinion.

Aaliyah similarly listed "the diversity of perspectives" as an important feature of the American class structure to her. She reported strong confidence in her English communication skills, as she had taken classes in American-style institutions in her home country in both English and in her home country's language since elementary

school. This allowed her to enjoy exchanging opinions with her classmates without being worried about translating them correctly into English. She felt that her classes were “diverse,” with classmates that “genuinely cared about [her] opinions.”

Matilda echoed similar sentiments. She enjoyed the “openness” of the class structures, although the idea of getting chosen to give a response on a reading was “scary.” Though generally feeling confident in sharing her opinions in English during her classes, there were many factors that affected this feeling–often changing on a class-by-class basis. She listed things like mood, level of tiredness, and previous rehearsal or preparation in English as examples of conditions that could influence her ability to share in class.

Other participants felt less positively about the format of their American classes, or noted it as one of their biggest challenges when adjusting to the US class style. Katy emphasized the anxiety she felt when going to her classes, and disclosed her goal of speaking up in class “at least once” during the quarter. Similarly, Emily had difficulties speaking up in class, and explained that in most of her classes she did not speak at all unless she had to. Both felt that they often did not have interesting comments to make, or did not have time to think of a comment and then translate it into English.

A few also expressed concerns that they would offend classmates or appear impolite when speaking up during class discussions. This was one reason that Katy felt that she could not participate in class discussions, and said that doing so was “unnatural.” Christina also commented on her fear of appearing impolite, stating, “when we have conversations or discussion, they will really jump into the conversation so fast and for me, I was like, so scared to offend other people.” Given that they come from the

same country, Katy and Christina's resonating responses potentially suggest significant cultural differences in how people in their home countries approach conversations. Other participants from different regions, such as Ana, signaled minimal stress about offending their classmates when expressing their opinion in class. These contrasting experiences highlight the different reactions students may have to traditional US class structures, which may be helpful for professors to be aware of when planning class activities.

Ana also had difficulty speaking up in some of her classes, and felt that this mainly stemmed from her difficulties with English. "You took 11 years of English and you realize you didn't know anything until you are like 18," she remarked while explaining her decision to come to the US to study English for her undergraduate studies. While she was outspoken and often had comments on the class content that interested her, her confidence in her English communication largely depended on the course and its content. For classes that she was not interested in, she found it difficult to engage or put in the effort to prepare to use English. She also found many of her class's structures to be rigid, not supporting the creative approaches that she preferred.

Counter to some of the other participants' opinions, Ana also criticized many of her classes for teaching content with a "limited" perspective. Although she expected other students from her department to use a diverse set of approaches and perspectives in their research, she did not find other students focusing on issues or topics relevant to non-Western countries like hers. While other students, like Matilda, felt more comfortable in her classes due to the volume of other international students, Ana expressed disappointment that she was the only "fresh" international student in her

small cohort. The department and teaching style of the course were important factors of her ability to feel like she could engage, however, as she did mention enjoying the creativity and diversity of perspectives and methods she encountered in classes from other departments, like the sociology and American ethnic studies departments.

Preparedness was a common thread between the participants' responses about their participation in the American classroom. In particular, the students who were not previously exposed to the participation expectations of the American class style or who expressed more difficulties expressing their thoughts in English mentioned feeling the need to spend extra time to prepare for things like in-class discussions or presentations. Christina noted that her reading assignments often were time-consuming, as she felt that she needed to spend extra time compiling her thoughts into English in anticipation of having to share them in class. For her class presentations, she prepared by practicing in front of her English-speaking boyfriend and asking the professor for extra support: "I just reach out to them like, 'I'm really sorry, I cannot speak.' Is there any way that I could still fulfill the requirements? But they are really nice. They even arrange time before my presentation to practice with me and to listen to the proposal."

Emily conveyed similar difficulties preparing for class discussions and group work due to both her lack of confidence in her English communication abilities and her shy personality. When asked about how she felt about her ability to participate in the classroom, she described it as "challenging. When the teacher is holding the lecture I need to listen carefully… Like, whether I can understand it. And I need to take notes during the discussion part. I will first say my answers in [my native language] and then translate to English. It's so hard, and it takes a lot of time." Participating in larger group

discussions also tended to make her “nervous,” causing her English to “downgrade.” Ana described similar sentiments, noting that she frequently felt “frustrated” and “unprepared” during her classes when she had things to say but could not say them.

While taking the extra effort to prepare is certainly time-consuming, it is likely a significant component of how many international students increase their confidence when communicating in the classroom. After Christina stated her belief that her confidence speaking in English had risen substantially after her first year at UW, a follow-up question was asked about what she felt were the biggest reasons for her confidence boost. “Time” was her first answer, followed by her second answer of “being prepared.” She explained that her classes had a lot of readings, and she would need to take a lot of time to read and create a response that she could give in class if needed. Giving students the time and opportunity to prepare by clearly communicating their expectations in advance may be one way professors can help international students in particular build their confidence in communicating in the classroom.

As Emily and Ana’s experience suggest, English ability and personality both appear to be important factors impacting the participants’ ability to adjust to the classroom format common in the US. Dylan, equipped with prior experience studying in the US during high school, found that was not only able to adjust quickly to the communication style that many of his American professors expected, but thrive under these expectations. He found that he could relate better to the outspoken participation style and direct writing style his American professors encouraged than to the indirect communication style that students from his home country tended to use. While other participants like Emily, Christina, and Matilda also came from countries that expected

students to take the role of listener rather than active discussion participant in the classroom, they had limited participation in discussions despite having varying perceptions of their English ability. Adjusting to this communication-forward classroom style, let alone in a new language, is a unique challenge for some international students that professors should be aware of.

Some participants found ways to avoid the discomfort of speaking in large classroom social situations while still contributing to the class. Christina explained that she felt that she was still able to be a good group member during group presentations despite her lack of confidence in her English presentation ability by taking the initiative to reach out to other members to schedule meetings, take notes during discussions, and take on more of the research components. Although doing so lets her avoid the pressure of presenting, these tasks still demonstrate good communication skills and mastery over the content, albeit in a lower-pressure environment. Christina's example is just one way that students who are less confident in their English communication can practice these skills while growing their confidence. It may be helpful for professors to employ creative avenues for participation like this when accommodating international students.

For a few participants, the prepared question about how they felt their identity as international students shaped their classroom experiences deviated to a greater discussion of the concept of "identity" in the American university. The question posed some difficulty for Christina, who, after some initial confusion, explained that the term and concept were not common in her home country. She felt that because she had been raised with a strong emphasis on politeness and humbleness, personal identity

was something that she had only begun considering after coming to study in the US. One major reason she enjoyed the US higher education system was because she felt that she was encouraged to explore her interests through her studies rather than focus solely on achieving good grades. Aaliyah also commented positively on this aspect of the US system, noting that she liked being able to choose her own path in her research interests and major.

Being conscious of these cultural differences may be one way of helping international students thrive in the classroom; as the experiences of several participants, like Katy and Matilda, indicate, many international students may feel more comfortable in smaller, low-stakes group settings where they can practice voicing their opinions and building their confidence. Including a variety of ways to engage in the classroom may also be one way that professors can support the various learning styles of UW's diverse student population.

Academic Expectations

Whereas the previous section concerned communication as it relates to the style and structure of UW classes, this section focuses on the expectations and communication of UW assignments. Understanding academic expectations proved to be its own challenge, and even some participants who had already had a strong English-speaking background noticed a considerable adjustment period after first coming to UW.

Many students noted that the frequency of assignments was much higher than in their countries. Emily felt that her UW classes were very rigorous, and she had very little

freetime to pursue her interests outside of class. As opposed to her classes in undergrad, which often had minimal assignments outside of a paper at the end of the term, her UW classes had much more frequent, time-consuming assignments. While it is possible that this may be due partially to her more advanced program, she attributed this to the language barrier and difference in academic culture. Matilda, Dylan, and Katy also felt that they were busier with assignments, though they were not necessarily more difficult; Katy referred to the assignments as “busywork,” and commented that while the readings were often not new information to her, reading them and preparing her opinions in English took considerable time.

Many participants felt that this high volume of assignments also tended to be very reading- and writing-intensive, which could often cause them to feel like they did not have the English skills to complete the work in a timely manner. Emily admitted that she was often forced to rush through their assignments or skip over readings entirely to make it through everything. When she did, she felt that it was because her English was “poor,” signaling a loss of confidence.

Another notable barrier was a lack of communication about the expectations of the assignments–especially in regards to written assignments like essays. Most students reported feeling puzzled at American writing conventions, even after some having completed multiple years in their program. While words like “open” and “diverse” were used by many participants to describe the general format of UW classes, words like “strict,” “structured,” and “formal” were common when students broached the topic of writing assignments. Dylan, an undergraduate, relayed his experience taking a writing course his first year that helped him adjust to American writing conventions after first

forcing him to “relearn” how to write. Other participants who did not take a writing course, like Matilda and Ana, however, considered writing one of their biggest challenges when completing her program. Although Matilda had not yet received much negative feedback about her writing, she remarked that “something that would be helpful for international students [would be] to get something like a sample of one page of how the layout should look or what the conventions are usually like or something like that.” A few participants suggested a similar desire for more support when trying to parse the traditional American writing style, as it could feel like it was something they were already supposed to know.

Matilda’s comment points to another common theme of frustration among the participants: a lack of feedback from professors on their assignments. While Aaliyah and Matilda generally felt confident when completing their assignments in English, they still both commented on their disappointment that many of their professors did not readily offer feedback or suggestions for improvement. Aaliyah explained that even after going out of her way to meet with the professors from her program to ask for feedback, it was often not detailed. For Ana, who made the same assertion but did not feel very confident in her performance, this tendency left her without reassurance or opportunities to improve. She noticed that her professors often seemed too busy to communicate one-on-one feedback to students–potentially a consequence of UW’s large size.

Comments from several students on the unique academic expectations given to international students provide some conjecture on why this phenomenon might be common. According to several participants, UW professors seemed to be more lenient when grading the work of international students. These observations related specifically

to the participants' English outputs, which was the area most of the participants from non-English speaking backgrounds were most concerned about in regards to their grades. While some of the participants who commented on the topic presented it as a benefit of being an international student, others presented their experiences with it in a more negative light.

On one hand, some participants appreciated that their professors did not harshly deduct points for English mistakes. When asked about the positive and negative aspects of being an international student, Emily listed this as one of the major benefits for her. She elaborated by saying that she felt more free to make mistakes because her peers and professors recognized that English was not her native language. Matilda expressed similar feelings and highlighted another potential reason behind this experience: "I don't have that much anxiety about making mistakes, and I think it's because I see so many other international students." As Matilda's statement suggests, the sheer number of international students at UW may be helping normalize nontraditional usage of English in academia. It is likely that as international students continue to become an integral part of the student population at UW, proper English will continue to follow the trend that Emily and Matilda's observations demonstrate and become less of a necessity.

On the other hand, several participants felt less positively toward professors' leniency toward them. As indicated previously, this often left the participants feeling confused or without the support to grow academically. Matilda explained that although she could tell that American writing conventions looked different than how she wrote, her professors did not comment on it when grading her papers. Because of this, she

continued to ignore the conventions but wished that she received more instruction from her professors. Ana also experienced confusion around her grades. While her grades were often as good as her peers', she felt that her work was not as good because of her difficulties with English. She also noted the "imposter syndrome" that resulted from this perception. She elaborated further on her desire for more feedback and instruction from her professors by commenting, "I feel like I still don't know what my grade is saying about my job or my writing process." She then recounted her experiences trying to sit down with her professors to obtain feedback: "they always say 'you are okay. You're doing your job as you should be doing it.'" Overall, she felt that the grades and brief feedback she received did not provide an accurate point of comparison that she could use for improvement.

These two contrasting perspectives offer a few points of reflection. First, they suggest that this method of lenient feedback and grading for international students can feel both accommodating to the students who face linguistic or cultural barriers and stifling to the students' improvement. Both of these things can be true at once, as Matilda indicated in her case. For other students, as we see from the contrasting opinions of Emily and Matilda, the outcome can depend on factors like the student's personality or goals. While some students may appreciate the lowered pressure from being graded less harshly than domestic students, other students depend on grades as a metric for improvement and may feel some concerns if their grades do not match their perceived success.

Good feedback does not need to be the trade-off for good grades, however. Just because a professor is not grading heavily on perfect English or adherence to American

conventions, as Matilda and Ana's experiences suggest, does not mean that they have to give up on helping the student identify areas for improvement. As these examples show, international students are often hard workers who, for one reason or another, chose to challenge themselves by studying in another language; while it may be outside of the scope of the role of professor to scrutinize and correct their students' every mistake, providing sufficient feedback to allow students to grow as intellectuals is not. These participants' stories suggest a desirable middle-ground, where students with English or cultural barriers receive both grace and guidance in their journey as academics. These results echo those from Wang and Sun's (2020) study, which recommends, "teachers in all classrooms should provide more constructive feedback with details about how to improve the students' works rather than simply giving them verbal compliments." Sustained, detailed feedback that goes beyond a simple "good work" has been shown to support student growth tremendously–especially for receptive, goal-driven students like these participants (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ahea et al., 2016).

To examine this trend from another angle, the participants' desire for more feedback despite getting good grades and minimal negative comments from professors could have some situational or cultural contexts for many students. Katy, for instance, describes the biggest struggle of her Master's program as "getting rid of perfectionism." While Katy's demeanor appeared relatively outgoing during the interview, she expressed her difficulties talking during lectures and discussions with her peers. She explained that she had been going to therapy during much of her first year to help her adjust to her life in the US, and through the process had been working to remind herself

that “I don't have to be the master on the topics, it is fine to be a listener.” Based on her conversations with her international student friends, she guessed that many international students–or at least, those from a similar cultural background–felt similar pressure to be good or exceptional students.

Katy’s conjecture is not without substance–especially when paired with some participants’ stories about the general pressure they experience as international students. Dylan, when asked about how he believed being an international student has affected his academic experience, explained that he felt that he was “always on a timer.” With the additional weight of Visa regulations on his shoulders, grades and academic performance are of increased importance. As Ana’s desire for detailed feedback despite her good grades suggests, the stakes for being able to demonstrate learned class skills are higher for those international students who will be entering an increasingly competitive job market “on a timer.”

Katy’s comment on “getting rid of perfectionism” also suggests that this tendency existed before coming to America, however; as this statement indicates, outstanding academic performance may be an expectation generated by a student’s cultural background, as well. As previously mentioned, many participants, like Emily, enjoyed feeling like they could make mistakes more easily in the US compared to their home country. Christina makes a similar comparison by discussing her experience after changing her research topic last minute:

> In [my country], we will try to avoid any mistakes when we make a decision. We will do a lot of research or design a good proposal so that we can make sure we won't make any mistakes while we are doing our project. Here, when I do my

> project here I feel like it's really different. Like, my advisor will tell me to just go for it, just try it. And if it's not working, then we just move on. Do other tasks to find a better condition for my project.

As these comparisons suggest, some international students may come from backgrounds with a stronger emphasis on excellent academic achievement, making them feel more pressure to perform perfectly. While this can differ drastically from country to country and even family to family, this trend among the participants may hold some connection to the relatively large number of participants who wish for more constructive feedback from UW professors.

Ana's story also highlights the potential gap between international students' perceptions of their own communication skills and external measures of their communication skills. While her professors provided reassurance, she still did not feel confident in her English ability, causing her to seek out feedback on how to improve. She described her experience with one of her favorite professors–also from South America–who gave both reassurance and suggestions for improvement. For a student like Ana, who had relatively low confidence in her ability to communicate in her courses, this kind of feedback style both challenged her and gave her an accurate assessment of her work. As an additional benefit, receiving detailed comments about her work made her feel that the professor was more engaged in her work than her other professors.

As this section shows, having clear communication established between the professor and their class is essential for students to be able to navigate their courses; this especially presents a challenge for international students, who may have to overcome additional linguistic and sociocultural hurdles. Explicit instruction, thoughtful

assessments of assignments, and substantial feedback are just a few ways that professors can help international students feel confident about their ability to successfully communicate in their UW courses.

Professor Interactions

The major common theme that emerged from the previous section on Academic Expectations involved professors' communication of their academic standards and expectations, but the participants had more to say about their general ability to interact with their professors. This was a topic that frequently came up when participants were asked if their experience attending school in the US had been aligned with their prior expectations, as many participants noted significant differences between their interactions with US professors and professors or teachers from their home country.

Generally speaking, the participants reacted positively when asked about their interactions with their professors. Matilda related, "with professors I've really only had very nice friendly professors, and I always had the impression that they're very helpful, especially maybe once they kind of notice "oh she's not from the US." Aaliyah, Christina, and Dylan also responded particularly positively, and seemed to have the most ease reaching out to professors. Other participants responded more neutrally or reported that they did not interact often with their professors, though all the participants pointed to at least one or two positive experiences with their professors.

The most notable theme between the participants' responses was surprise at the informality with which they could reach out to their professors. While domestic students might quickly find it natural to speak to a professor rather informally or use their first

name when addressing them, many of the participants noted a significant adjustment period. Christina, for example, recounted the hours she spent agonizing over emails to her professors when she first came to UW. Because she was used to having to use specific words and phrases in her emails to her professors during her undergraduate schooling in her home country, she became concerned that she would appear rude to her UW professors if she did not use equivalent English wording. This was especially difficult because she did not know how formally she needed to speak to her professors, nor what conventions to use if she did so.

Although the student-professor relationship initially confused several participants, many of them still enjoyed this less formal relationship. Matilda retold her experience becoming close with a professor she took several classes from throughout her first year at UW:

> I had two or three classes from the English department, and it was with one of the same professors. So I got to know her a little bit just throughout the quarters, and last quarter it was kind of clear that it was the last seminar I could take from the English department, and also the last one I could take with her as my professor. And in the end she hugged me and said bye. And so that was very nice, that would never happen in [my home country].

While this type of connection is likely an exception rather than a rule–especially at a school as large as UW–Matilda's story speaks to the tendency for American professors to encourage casual interactions with their students.

This more casual relationship is often encouraged from day one of classes, which can add to the adjustment difficulties for students who are not used to interacting

with their professors in this way. Dylan and Matilda highlighted this by noting their difficulty getting used to addressing professors by their first names during their first few quarters. Matilda explained that her language had polite forms for addressing professors, which are not present in English. While this presented some communication challenges and uncertainty early on in their time at UW, it ultimately led to a feeling of "approachability" between herself and her professors.

Statements by Dylan, Christina, and Aaliyah also emphasized the approachable nature of this relationship in contrast to their experiences with educators in their home countries. Dylan, for example, described teachers and professors in his home country as "a second set of parents," illustrating the perception of professors as highly involved members of students' lives and development. He noted that while there is still a power dynamic between US professors and students, the relationship between the two feels more like "equals" or "peers." in comparison. He described his experiences forming close relationships with some of his US professors, and even felt comfortable reaching out to them after finishing the course–a dynamic that he did not think he would have had in his home country.

Several participants went beyond the initial question about their interactions with professors to remark on their experiences with other administrative members of their academic careers, such as advisors or department heads. When explaining her background and reasoning for coming to UW, Ana emphasized the importance of being able to speak her native language with her department advisor on her decision to come to UW. Being able to speak in her native tongue allowed her to feel not only more relaxed and accepted at the school, but also more confident that she had someone that

she could communicate with about her academic (and non-academic) life. Emily also cited her assigned peer mentor as the person she talked the most to about academic issues she was having.

As this trend suggests, the participants generally felt comfortable approaching their professors for help during and outside of class hours. Matilda, for instance, contrasted her relationships with UW professors and professors from her undergraduate university in her home country: “you always feel a little guilty when you ask them for something or you write them an email, like ‘I’m sorry for taking your time.’ Here I feel like, yeah, professors are kind of more approachable.” Christina also remarked that her ability to reach out to professors had increased throughout her first year, despite initially being unsure of what tone and language to use with them. Over time, she became comfortable reaching out to professors when she had a question or problem.

While nearly all of the participants generally felt positive about their ability to approach and communicate with UW professors, a few participants did note some difficulties. For example, while Aaliyah did report a strong sense of approachability and interest in her academic ventures from the professors in her major department, she did not find these traits as constant in professors from other departments she had taken classes in. She felt that this was natural, given that she is “not their responsibility.” While she did not find all of these professors to be as “engaged” as the professors from her department, she still felt positively overall about her professors at UW. Christina also generally preferred to talk about classwork with her peers rather than her professors when possible because she was less self-conscious about her English when talking with peers. While she felt that her professors would understand if her English was not perfect

when talking to them, she felt less nervous about her English mistakes when talking with other students who were more her age.

Another gap in communication some participants noticed was professors' lengthy response time to emails. Aaliyah noted that she realized during her first few semesters that she would need to send an email well in advance if she wanted to get a response in time from her professors. Dylan had similar experiences, remarking that one of his biggest adjustments was learning how to be more direct when contacting professors. After his first year, he learned to be more proactive and was less afraid to send follow-up emails when he needed to.

While some of the difficulties participants had when communicating with professors are connected to their identity as international students, some may also be a common point of adjustment for incoming students. When discussing some of the difficulties she had had adjusting at UW, Aaliyah noted that some of her experiences were common even for domestic students. While the participants' surprise about things like professors taking days to respond or being asked to call professors by their first names may take some international students more time to become accustomed to, some of these things may also be ways of communicating that domestic students also take some time to get used to. Moreover, some of these issues may be unique to a large research university like UW, such as long email response times or lack of detailed feedback from professors.

Peer Interactions

The topic of peer interactions was another mixed bag among the participants, with communication confidence again proving an influential factor. The American classroom structure, according to many participants, tends to emphasize peer collaboration, causing communication between peers to be an important component. However, when asked about their interactions with peers, most participants' responses extended even beyond the confines of the classroom to involve their experiences interacting with other students and generally making friends at UW. While this study seeks to understand what relationship these students' confidence in their communication skills has to their classroom experience, the fact that this topic was voiced by so many participants illustrates how fundamental these interactions are to students' confidence while communicating.

The participants who responded especially positively about their interactions with peers felt a general sense of respect from their classmates, and felt that they had come to feel comfortable talking with them in English during class discussions and group projects. For example, Aaliyah reported that her interactions with peers were "nothing short of positive… they seem interested in my perspective." In fact, her experience growing up in another country felt like a positive force in her discussions with peers during her classes in the International Studies department, as many of her classmates were interested in hearing her talk about various topics from the perspective of her home country. She also found herself interested in her classmates' perspectives, and frequently interacted with them in order to understand the various lenses they brought as individuals. Christina reflected a very similar sense of mutual respect for her classmates, and appreciated how her classmates were willing to accept different

perspectives and be open about their own opinions. She felt that this allowed her to connect with them, and felt emboldened to develop her own identity and opinions. Though they had very different experiences adjusting to the collaboration-heavy culture of most UW classes, Aaliyah and Christina in particular expressed appreciation for both the structure itself, and the other students they found themselves interacting with.

Other participants were less overtly enthusiastic, or recounted both positive and negative experiences when trying to communicate with their peers. Emily said she avoided talking with her peers during class unless she had to, although she did not report any particularly negative experiences. She explained that because she rarely was required to do group work while attending undergrad in her home country, it took several quarters to adjust to her group work-heavy classes. She explained that while she had not made any strong connections with her peers during her classes, she did feel more comfortable talking to them–especially in smaller group settings. Dylan also felt relatively confident communicating with his peers and had generally positive experiences in his classes, although he noted that he had an easier time connecting to other students outside of his classes and made most of his friends in his extracurriculars.

Ana expressed the most difficulty when asked about her experiences interacting with peers in the classroom, immediately detailing her struggle to establish an understanding both linguistically and culturally. She often felt discouraged or frustrated by things like her classmates misunderstanding her or correcting her pronunciation when she spoke. She also struggled to relate to many of her classmates' academic interests, and felt that her academic interests of social justice and global perspectives of

sociology were very different from those that her peers were typically interested in. Unlike Aaliyah, she did not feel that her classmates were interested in her country and its perspectives.

While the participants' general class interactions were polarized, the participants reported overwhelmingly that going beyond these classroom interactions into establishing friendships at UW (and more generally in Seattle) was a difficult task. For those participants who did not feel that they had strong English skills, this was a huge challenge inside and outside of the classroom. Emily, for instance, felt that she did not make many connections in her courses because she rarely spoke during classes. Other than during group projects, she did not try to engage with her classmates. She recounted one instance where she felt like she made a friend with another international student from her country. The two exchanged numbers and spent the quarter chatting about the class. As the class ended, however, the two fell out of frequent communication. While she talked daily with her friends from her home country, she did not feel like she could make new friends with American students easily. Whether because she was shy in a new country and social situation, or because she simply did not feel like she was able to communicate well with her English peers, she concluded that she did not have any classmates or friends that she could regularly speak English with.

However, even those students who had been studying English for years and felt relatively comfortable in the classroom had some trouble understanding how to make friends that lasted beyond UW's quarter-long classes. Matilda also related some difficulties understanding how to interact with her classmates outside of class, which

she chalked largely up to misunderstandings of cultural differences. She felt that people from her country took longer to get to know each other, and was surprised how quickly her American classmates began calling her a “friend.” She also noticed that her American classmates would often say things like “we should hang out!” but would not follow through with any plans. Matilda felt that this was very different from how she became friends with people from her home country, and was no longer sure how seriously to take her American classmates’ casual hang out invitations and declarations of friendship.

One sentiment that appeared more generalizable across the participants’ reports, however, was appreciation for other international students in the class. Although several participants reported gravitating toward other international students from their own country, they tended to feel more comfortable communicating not only with, but around other international students in general. Matilda felt that the presence of other international students in her classes was the reason she did not feel overly worried about making English mistakes. She suspected that she would feel anxious about her English if she was in classes with only native English speakers, but the large quantity of other nonnative speakers helped ease this worry. Ana expressed her desire for even more international students in her classes, as some of the classes she had taken had not had as many as she would have hoped.

Several participants pointed out that it was much easier for them to make friends with other international students from their home country than domestic students, highlighting the importance of linguistic and cultural affinity. Ana noted that even the few friends she made who were American had some ties to her region, such as a friend

whose partner was from South America. Matilda, Katy, Ana, and Christina reported that they were able to easily fit in with friend groups of other students from her home country, leading them to feel less urgency to make friends with her other peers. Matilda and Ana both said they recognized that this did not let them practice English as much as they wanted to, however, and had begun making an effort to make friends with more domestic students. While their interviews suggested that they each had different levels of success, both were in alignment when discussing the difficult process of connecting with domestic students.

It is difficult to pinpoint what makes some international students able to easily connect with other students, while others feel stuck figuring out how to communicate with their peers; while English communication skills undoubtedly come into play at some level, many domestic students struggle to find friends too. While Emily did express some speaking anxiety, she felt that it was partially because she was “not outgoing” that she had a hard time making friends. Ana also shared several times throughout the course of the interview that she was not especially confident in her current level of English proficiency and expressed frustration that she felt that she was not improving much, yet she expressed her belief that her difficulties connecting with peers went beyond her English: “personally, I feel like I cannot connect. I don't know why, this is a big question… I mean, beyond thinking about my English.” While this study is not an assessment of the participants’ actual English proficiency, Ana’s experience does contrast significantly with the experience of someone like Christina, who expressed a similar lack of confidence throughout her interview but did not report the same difficulty connecting with her peers. As with the participants’ experiences in the previous

sections, things like personality and background seem to also have a significant impact on each student's interactions with their classmates.

Another unique trait of UW Seattle that could be inhibiting relationship-building in classes is its adherence to the quarter system rather than the semester system, which exchanges more classes for less time in each class. In other words, instead of the two 15 to 16 week-long semesters that many institutions employ, UW has three 10 to 11 week-long quarters. This shorter time span spent in each class might mean more difficulty establishing relationships, especially for students who are already having to take extra time to adjust to a new country's social environment. When paired with UW's status as a large research university in which students oftentimes find themselves in classes with many students, it may be that UW's class structure is not conducive to finding meaningful friendships as an international student.

As one participant briefly mentioned in their interview, it may also be the case that Seattle itself is a difficult environment to make friends in. Often dubbed "The Seattle Freeze," Seattle has the reputation of being a cold and challenging place to make friends in–especially for those that are not from the area. This reputation is not unsubstantiated, either; according to the 2013 Greater Seattle Civic Health Index, only 37.0% of Seattle residents talked to their neighbor frequently compared to the overall US's 43.5%, putting Seattle at rank 47 out of 51 similar communities (Seattle City Club, 2014). Similarly, only 13.6% of Seattle respondents gave or received favors with their neighbors frequently compared to the overall US's 14.9%, with Seattle ranked 37th out of 51. To this data, the study concludes that "we have work to do to foster a sense of openness and welcome." As this reputation suggests, it may be that the location of UW

is part of the problem for these participants and other international students like them. While it is likely that linguistic and cultural differences construct a communication barrier between these students and their peers, the frigid social climate of Seattle does not make their struggle any easier.

It is important for UW to take these concerns seriously; for the generation of students that have had to deal with the aftermath of a pandemic that exacerbated already-increasing rates of social isolation, their time on campus may be one of their best, if not only, opportunities to socialize to socialize during the day (Kannan & Veazie 2022). As UW continues to try to return to “normal,” it may be the case that the resources that helped students make connections before the pandemic are no longer enough. It is not just students’ social lives that stand to benefit, either, as many studies have proven just how important of a tool socialization is for student learning (Zappa-Hollman & Duff 2015; Hurst et al. 2013). While these problems exist on a scale beyond UW or even the American college campus, both UW and its professors can utilize this knowledge to create these opportunities for students.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of international students’ English communication confidence by examining the common themes that emerged across participants' experiences taking classes at the University of Washington. At the very least, strong confidence about these communication skills during classes appears to be an important factor that can dramatically influence students’ experiences and decisions. This is not to say that it is the only factor, however, as the interviews

demonstrated just how much other aspects, such as personality, location, and background, can matter as well. Examining the connections found between participants' accounts can offer insight into both the key strengths and potential areas for improvement of the UW's academic experience.

Although the American classroom format may seem natural to domestic students or those who have already had some exposure to it, the uniquely communication-centered style may require more explicit instruction about how to stay engaged for those students who are not used to having to participate in group discussions and communicate their own opinions about the classwork. Based on how students with low confidence in their English communication ability responded, professors may be able to support students who are new to this style of learning by providing clear expectations for participation, along with plenty of low-stakes opportunities to practice participating. This may allow the students who have expressed needing more time to prepare for classes to do so, while allowing them to grow their confidence in their communication.

Despite the challenge of having to express their thoughts in English on-the-spot, the participants' responses illustrate that this encouragement of a variety of perspectives is what the participants enjoyed the most about the American classroom format. The participants generally felt that their experiences and identity mattered, and they were also able to learn from their peers. UW professors should continue to promote these valuable opportunities, even if it takes some adjustment for students.

About their academic expectations, many participants found it challenging to complete the large volume of assignments–especially when they were not confident that

they understood the parameters of the submissions. Even if not always challenging, the participants felt that their assignments were time-consuming–especially for those students who felt that their English ability was a barrier. In some cases, the participants felt that they simply had not been instructed enough on American conventions of topics like writing. As some participants suggested, professors should be careful to provide proficient resources and instruction for students who do not have a background taking American classes, and be aware that some students may need additional time or support when completing assignments in English. It may also be helpful to provide multiple avenues for engaging with the class material to accommodate students who have different learning styles or encounter communication barriers to completing traditional assignments.

While many participants appreciated that their professors were generally understanding of their status as a nonnative speaker and recognized this as a benefit of attending school in the US, it is still important that professors offer sufficient feedback to students' assignments. As several participants' responses show, doing so not only supports students' academic growth, but also demonstrates to them that the professor is engaged with their students. For international students who are in an unfamiliar learning environment, this is especially crucial.

The participants' generally positive experiences with their professors suggests professor approachability as another key strength of the American institution's education system. Although it took time for some participants to get used to the more relaxed relationship between professors and students in the US, they felt that this allowed them to create stronger relationships with their professors. Professors can

continue to foster this environment by being intentional about expressing interest in their students through avenues like feedback. Quicker communication outside of class may also help students feel more comfortable approaching them for help, although this may be difficult if a professor is busy. By continuing to increase accessibility and visibility of other academic resources, such as academic advisors or peer mentors, UW may be able to further encourage international students who are struggling to reach out for help and counteract some of the downsides of attending a large university in a new environment.

Finally, finding opportunities to have meaningful communication with peers may be the most persistently challenging aspect of taking UW classes as an international student, as illustrated by the participants' mutually reinforcing responses. Lack of speaking confidence prevented several participants from trying to communicate with their classmates unless they had to, and many of those that did try to interact with their domestic peers found that they had more success instead talking to other students from their home country. The reports also illustrated that, even when ignoring any potential English barrier, it was difficult to translate these interactions into friendships outside of the classroom.

Fostering a better environment for international students to engage with their peers may also prove a challenging task, especially since the line separating the inside and outside of the classroom is so blurry. As a few participants suggested, smaller discussion groups may be a good way to help students become more comfortable voicing their opinions and making mistakes. This low-stakes environment might also

allow students more space to discuss topics beyond just the course content, allowing deeper friendships to grow.

The participants' reports about feeling more comfortable when around other international students may also provide one way of easing discomfort. It is clear from the interviews that inviting international perspectives into classes is as generative as previous research has suggested it is. When interacting with other international students, participants reported positive effects like feeling mutual interest in their classmates' perspectives, more comfort when making communication mistakes, and an easier time interacting and making friends. While interacting with native speakers has positive effects too, continuing to emphasize diversity and global perspectives in its academics is one way UW can support international students as they navigate the university's social environment.

While this sample of seven international students represents a wide range of experiences and backgrounds, its small size may limit the study from representing the even wider range of experiences that exists at UW. More data about specific groups, such as students from countries not included or students with less academic experience, may be helpful for understanding which correlations can be linked more specifically to the students' international student status. For example, because many of the participants are Master's students with prior academic experience, it is difficult to determine how the experiences of Freshman international students can be improved. Further research on this topic with a larger and more diverse group of students would be useful for creating stronger connections and suggestions for improvement.

Another limitation of this study is in its focus solely on University of Washington students. While UW is a relatively diverse school with a large international student population, this study does not account for the experiences of students at other schools. This can be especially seen through the Peer Interaction section, in which the social climate of the school and the surrounding area is put into question. Given the strong institutional diversity of the US, it is likely that some trends would change depending on factors like institution size, location, type, and student population. While keeping a narrow scope might allow for more tailored statements when discussing solutions, it is difficult to determine how generalizable these statements might be without other points of comparison. Acquiring these other points of comparison through future research would help ground this study, allowing for stronger statements about both UW international students and international students as a group.

To return to the previous studies that relate to this topic, we see that English language ability and communication ability indeed merit differentiation, as these two skills are closely linked but could present themselves in different ways in the classroom. Wilczewski and Alon's (2022) study provides a good baseline for understanding why some students may feel like they are strong English speakers, yet struggle to adjust to things like writing conventions or social situations. The current study also builds on Wilczewski and Alon's study, as well as the research by Ravichandran et al., (2023), by demonstrating how other factors can run interference between these two skills that seem the same at a glance. When attempting to support the growth of international students' communication abilities in their classes, it is important to note that helping

them feel comfortable or successful may not be as simple as requiring them to take an English course.

The current study also supports previous research on international student adjustment that suggests that the non-academic side of an international student's experience can tremendously impact the academic side. Zappa-Holman and Duff's (2015) INoP analysis provides a framework for understanding how students' social practices influence their language learning and academic performance in that language. Using this framework, international students open themselves to more learning opportunities when they surround themselves with informal relationships and interactions with their peers. It is no surprise, then, that the participants chose to discuss their interactions with their peers outside of their classes in addition to the ones inside. These interactions had value to the participants, and this was then related directly back to their English communication ability in several cases. The participants reported richer learning environments and increased communicative confidence when part of a strong, diverse social network, and many of those that did not yet have this network were actively seeking it in order to improve their language learning and social experience. As the UW seeks to continue to create an integrative academic experience for international students, increased focus on resources that can provide this social network may be the next step.

Appendix A: List of Prepared Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about your background and why you decided to study in the US?
2. How does your experience studying in the US feel different from or similar to your previous experiences taking classes, either in high school or in undergrad?
    a. How has your experience taking classes at UW lived up to your expectations prior to coming to the US?
3. What have been some memorable experiences you've had while taking classes at UW, if any?
4. How do you feel like your identity as an international student has shaped your classroom experience, if at all?
    a. Are there any challenges or benefits you feel you have had that a domestic student wouldn't have?
5. How do you feel about your ability to participate in the English-speaking learning environment at UW?
    a. Can you describe for me how you feel that your English language ability has changed throughout your time at UW?
6. Can you walk me through your relationships with your peers/professors while taking classes at UW?

Works Cited

"2021 SEVIS by the Numbers Report" (2021). Study In the States. https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/sevisBTN2021.pdf

"Classroom Culture in the United States." (2019). Western Michigan University. https://wmich.edu/internationaladmissions/culture.

"English Proficiency." (n.d.). Office of Admissions. admit.washington.edu/apply/freshman/how-to-apply/english-proficiency/#englishfaq.

"Friendless in Seattle: A popular Web site is used for relief from our chilly social scene." (2009). The Seattle Times. https://www.seattletimes.com/life/lifestyle/friendless-in-seattle-a-popular-web-site-is-used-for-relief-from-our-chilly-social-scene/.

"Greater Seattle: King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties Civic Health Index" (2014). Seattle City Club. https://ncoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2013SeattleCHI.pdf.

"Independent Research Measuring the Impact of Study Abroad." (n.d.) NAFSA. https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/independent-research-measuring-impact-study-abroad.

"International Student Statistics" (2024). International Student Services. https://iss.washington.edu/about-iss/statistics/.

*“*International Students in the US” (2019). IIE Open Doors. https://opendoorsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Open-Doors-Graphics-2019.pdf.

“NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool.” (n.d). NAFSA. https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2.

"Performance Descriptors for the TOEFL iBT Test." (2021). ETS. https://www.ets.org/pdfs/toefl/toefl-ibt-performance-descriptors.pdf.

"TOEFL iBT Test and Score Data Summary 2022." (2023). ETS. https://www.ets.org/pdfs/toefl/toefl-ibt-test-score-data-summary-2022.pdf.

“Understanding US Classroom Culture” (n.d.). Montgomery College https://www.montgomerycollege.edu/international-students/resources-and-support/understanding-us-classroom-culture.html.

Bandura, A. (1977). ‘Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioural Change.’ Psychological Review, 84(2).

Ahea, M. M. A. B., Ahea, M. R. K., Rahman, I. (2016). The Value and Effectiveness of Feedback in Improving Students' Learning and Professionalizing Teaching in Higher Education. *Journal of Education and Practice*, *7*(16), pp 38-41. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1105282.pdf.

Ahrari, S., Krauss, S., Suandi, T., Abdullah, H., Dahalan, D. (2019). A stranger in a strange land: Experiences of adjustment among international postgraduate students in Malaysia. *Issues in Educational Research*, *29*(3), pp 611–632.

Andrade, M. (2009). The Effects of English Language Proficiency on Adjustment to University Life, *International Multilingual Research Journal,* 3(1), pp 16-34. 10.1080/19313150802668249

Aulia, N., Apoko, T. (2022). Self-Confidence and Speaking Skills for Lower Secondary School Students: A Correlation Study. *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching (Online)*, *10*(4), pp 551–560. https://doi.org/10.33394/jollt.v10i4.5641.

Badrasawi, K., Abu Kassim, N., Zubairi, A., Md Johar, E., Sidik, S. (2021). English Language Speaking Anxiety, Self-Confidence and Perceived Ability among Science and Technology Undergraduate Students: A Rasch Analysis. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, *29*(S3). https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.s3.16.

Bhatt, R., Bell, A., Rubin, D. L., Shiflet, C., Hodges, L. (2022). “Education Abroad and College Completion.” *Research in Higher Education*. Volume 63, pp 987–1014 .https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09673-z

Brennan, M., Dellow, D. (2013). International Students as a Resource for Achieving Comprehensive Internationalization. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, (161), pp 27–37. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20046.

Coertjens, L., Brahm, T., Trautwein, C., Linblom-Ylänne, S. (2016). Students' transition into higher education from an international perspective. *Higher Education*, 73(3), pp 357–369. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0092-y.

Dauber, D., Spencer-Oatey, H. (2023). Global communication skills: contextual factors fostering their development at internationalised higher education institutions. *Studies in Higher Education.,* 48(7), pp 1082–1096. https://doi.org/10.1080%2F03075079.2023.2182874.

"Fast Facts". (2024). Office of Planning & Budgeting. https://www.washington.edu/opb/uw-data/fast-facts/fast-facts-html-only/

Gay, G. (2013). Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), pp. 48–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23524357.

Ghenghesh, P. (2015). The Relationship Between English Language Proficiency And Academic Performance of University Students – Should Academic Institutions Really be Concerned? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature,* 4(2), 91-97. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.2p.91.

Gurler, I. (2015). Correlation between self-confidence and speaking skill of English language teaching and English language and literature preparatory students. *Curr Res Soc Sci*, 1(2), pp 14-19.

Hattie, J., Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, *77*(1), 81–112. https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487.

Hayrettin, T. (2015). The relationship between self-confidence and learning Turkish as a foreign language. *Educational Research and Reviews*, *10*(18), pp 2575–2589. https://doi.org/10.5897/ERR2015.2445.

Huang, C. (2011). *Self-concept and academic achievement: A meta-analysis of longitudinal relations*. *Journal of School Psychology, 49*(5), pp 505-528. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2011.07.001.

Hurst, B., Wallace, R., Nixon, S. B. (2013). The Impact of Social Interaction on Student Learning. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 52 (4). https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol52/iss4/5.

Jiali, L., Jamieson-Drake, D. (2013). "Examining the Educational Benefits of Interacting with International Students." Journal of International Students, 85(2). link.gale.com/apps/doc/A478824524/AONE?u=wash_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=31298bd5.

Kannan, V., Veazie P. (2022). "US trends in social isolation, social engagement, and companionship _ nationally and by age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, and work hours," 2003-2020. SSM Popul Health. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36618547/.

Lehtomäki, E., Moate, J., Posti-Ahokas, H. (2016). Global connectedness in higher education: student voices on the value of cross-cultural learning dialogue. Studies in Higher Education, 41(11). https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1007943.

Olutola, A., Adamu, D., Okonkwo, C. (2023). Self-Confidence as Correlate of Senior Secondary School Students' Academic Performance in English Language. *British Journal of Education*, *11*(3), pp 76–85. https://doi.org/10.37745/10.37745/bje.2013/vol11n37685.

Ravichandran A., Yovana V., Natalie C. (2023) 'Growing from an acorn to an oak tree': a thematic analysis of international students' cross cultural adjustment in the United States, *Studies in Higher Education*, 48:4, pp 567-581, 10.1080/03075079.2022.2150757.

Salem, M., Al Dyiar, M. (2014). The relationship between speaking anxiety and oral fluency of special education Arab learners of English. *Asian Social Science,* 10(12), pp 170-176. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v10n12p170.

Schoepp, K., Garinger, D. (2016). IELTS and Academic Success in Higher Education: A UAE Perspective. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature,* 5(3), https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.3p.145.

Sisavath, S. (2021). "Benefits of Studying Abroad for Graduate Employability: Perspectives of Exchange Students From Lao Universities." *Journal of International Students*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 547+. link.gale.com/apps/doc/A668596665/GIC?u=wash_main&sid=bookmark-GIC&xid=c67816f8.

Smithee, M., Greenblatt, S. L., Eland, A. (2004). U.S. Culture Series: U.S. Classroom Culture. NAFSA: Association of International Educators. https://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u.s-classroom-culture.pdf

Swanson, H, Kudo, M, Guzman-Orth, D. (2016). Cognition and literacy in English language learners at risk for reading disabilities: A latent transition analysis. Journal of Educational Psychology, 108 pp. 830-856, 10.1037/edu0000102.

Telbis, N. M., Helgeson, L., Kingsbury, C. (2014). International Students' Confidence and Academic Success. *Journal of International Students*, *4*(4), pp 330–341. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v4i4.452.

Tozini, K. (2020). Global Perspectives on International Student Experiences in Higher Education: Tensions and Issues. *Journal of International Students*, 10(2). http://dx.doi.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.32674/jis.v10i2.1707.

Young, T. J., Schartner A. (2014) The effects of cross-cultural communication education on international students' adjustment and adaptation, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development,* 35:6, pp 547-562, 10.1080/01434632.2014.884099.

Wang, C., Sun, T. (2020). Relationship between self-efficacy and language proficiency: A meta-analysis. *System, 95.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102366.

Wilczewski M, Alon I. (2023). Language and communication in international students' adaptation: a bibliometric and content analysis review. *Higher Education.* 85(6), pp 1235-1256. 10.1007/s10734-022-00888-8.

Yu, B., Shen, H. (2012). Predicting roles of linguistic confidence, integrative motivation and second language proficiency on cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations.* 36(1), pp 72–82. 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.12.002.

Zappa-Hollman, S., Duff, P. (2015). Academic English Socialization Through Individual Networks of Practice. *TESOL Quarterly*, *49*(2), pp. 333–368. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43893756.

Zhang, Y., & Guo, H. (2012). A study of English writing and domain-specific motivation and self-efficacy of Chinese EFL learners. Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics, 16(2).

Zimmermann, S. (1995). Perceptions of intercultural communication competence and international student adaptation to an American campus. *Communication Education*, *44*(4), pp 321–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634529509379022.