

## **Student Article**

### **A PhD is not a piece of cake, but a hard nut to crack: Some insights into international student experience in the UK**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This is a reflective article that looks my experiences as an international PhD student from Saudi Arabia at the University of East Anglia in the UK. Coming from a completely different learning context, several learning issues emerged through my postgraduate study. These issues, even though they were not directly linked to the course materials, had a huge impact on my learning experience. In this article, I reflect on critical thinking and the use of two languages in the learning process, as well as on some aspects of my personal life that had an impact on my research journey.

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#### **Introduction**

This paper aims to give an insight into some of the challenges ESOL international students may face during their study. By sharing my experiences, I hope to bring to the surface some of the issues I experienced during my PhD, the knowledge of which may be beneficial to both domestic and international PhD students. In addition, this may help some tutors and supervisors understand the challenges that face international PhD students.

My journey as an international student in the UK started in 2008 when I enrolled on an MA course at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia. After being awarded my Master's, I was very enthusiastic to start my PhD, and overjoyed when my application was accepted, as I felt I was following the path to achieve my dreams. Having started the course, I soon realised that this stage was completely different from the Master's, in that although it was more convenient with regard to deadlines and time pressures, there was much more work to be done. Throughout my PhD journey, I experienced several learning situations that influenced my vision and perspective. Most importantly, it gave me the opportunity to reflect on my personal experience as a researcher and a PhD student in the UK. The use of reflective practice is common in the educational field (Finlay, 2008). This process helps in understanding the rationale behind a decision a person makes in certain circumstances. The importance of this reflection according to Biggs is evident below:

A reflection in a mirror is an exact replica of what is in front of it. Reflection in professional practice, however, gives back to not what it is, but what might be, an improvement on the original. (Biggs,1999, p.6)

My reflection is informed by the reflective model of Gibbs's (1988). The model has six stages which form a cycle. The first stage is the Description of the situation, which includes the background and other information related to the situation you are reflecting on. The second stage is Feelings where your thoughts and feelings are discussed. The third stage is Evaluation where you look back at the situation and evaluate it. During the fourth stage, Analysis, you look at the situation and see how you could have done things differently, how the situation would have changed if you had not done things the way you did. The fifth stage is the Conclusion about what you have learnt from the experience, about your chances of going through a similar experience again, and why this may or may not happen. The sixth and final stage is an Action Plan, based on the impact of your experience, for the future in a similar situation (Gibbs, 1988).



Figure 1: Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988)

In the coming section I reflect on my learning journey in the light of the previously explained reflective cycle: starting with the challenges that face many international students as they study abroad, getting used to a new course structure, the social interaction with their peers and their personal life. This is followed by a questioning of my decision and an acknowledgement of the new experience. I highlight my situation as an international student who needs to obtain a certain level of critical thinking. I also discuss the impact of bilingualism.

### Challenges of doing a PhD abroad

During my PhD programme I had many responsibilities and roles that urged me to organise my time and apportion it between my study and looking after my children. This section looks at some of the obstacles I encountered and how I adapted to them. Some of these obstacles were related to my PhD student status, a role I was still unfamiliar with, while others were more personal and related to my role as a mother and a daughter.

*Getting used to a new course structure:* There are many variables that impacted on my experience. One of these was my struggle to adjust my MA student mind-set to a PhD student one. During the MA, all the nine members of our group were international students

who did not have much involvement with British students. Also, at that time we only needed to attend university three days a week for our lectures. Moreover, there was no specific place for Master's students to study in. I used to go to the library on the days I had lectures or studied at home when I did not have any lectures or seminars to attend. During my PhD the situation was different; there was a larger mixed group with both home and overseas students, some part time and others full time.

*PhD study area and social interaction:* As PhD students we had a study area in our school with twelve desks. Being in the study area with other students was an advantage, even though in the beginning it was a bit depressing as I was the only one who started in January as a full time student. I felt lost and was not sure where to go and what PPD training sessions I needed. For the first time in my learning experience, I came across British students who were doing the same course. Time passed with me attending sessions and seminars or doing huge amounts of reading and writing in connection with my study. Social interaction among the students had an impact on the harmony of the PhD study area. In order to have social interaction with other first year PhD students, I had to wait nine months until a new group joined in September. Unlike the home students who started their course before me, the new group had two British students who were open with international students and changed the idea I had earlier about British students and the way they perceived international ones. Coming every morning to the study area and busying myself with reading, writing and exchanging information and experiences with my fellow PhD students soon became a role almost as familiar to me as my role as a mother at home.

*Personal life overlaps with the journey:* I introduced myself to be in the study area during weekdays, staying there from the morning - after dropping my daughters off at their schools (nursery at one point) - up to 3 in the afternoon when I went to pick them up. Initially, I decided not to do any study at home and was busy with my parental duties unless there was an urgent issue. Being an international student prevented me from having the potential support I could have had from my extended family and in particular my parents and siblings, had I been doing my course in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, I had to distinguish between my duties as a PhD student and my duties as a mother, although sometimes things overlapped when I needed to take my study workload home. In fact, I often practised presentations with my daughters as the audience. Calls from home often gave me the much-needed motivation and encouragement to push myself further with my studies and return home with the desired qualification. However, sometimes such calls had the potential to negatively influence my studies. For example, there was often worrying news from home: during my second year my father was diagnosed with cancer and I badly wanted to go back and be with him; then my father-in-law had a stroke and he needed his son very much. In the first instance, my study went as planned though I tended to go back home during holidays to be beside my family. However, in the second case, when I was at the end of my third year, I had to go back home. The decision was made quickly and I arranged with my supervisor that I would come back once every three to four months and we agreed on having Skype meetings while I was away. These two incidents affected the progress of my PhD and made me unable to meet my deadline in terms of completing my study in three and a half years. Having said that, I managed to submit my thesis during my fourth year, and I was awarded my degree in the graduation ceremony in July 2014.

### **Questioning my decision**

I often questioned my decisions. Why did I start my PhD in the medium of a foreign language, and why did I not go back home after my MA? I could have found a good job and been near to my parents and things would have been easier. However, if I had not gone through this journey, I would have missed my experiences as an international student and I would not have been exposed to the importance of critical thinking and would not have learnt to value it as I do now. In addition, the improvement in my English and the ability to have an internal dialogue have been priceless to me. At one point when I was under a lot of pressure and needed to work at home, I spoke my thoughts aloud: “A PhD is not a piece of cake.” It required me to do a lot of reading and critical thinking. I found out that even though I had so much weight on my shoulders, I was still interested in what I was doing. Thus I began to realise that a PhD is not a piece of cake: but a hard nut to crack. I knew I could not have it all at once, so I needed patience and the will to keep things going. “Simple words and firm actions”. This was the slogan I adopted throughout my PhD journey when things got very challenging. It worked very well for me especially during my most difficult times as a student. Now, when I look back, I feel really grateful for all those challenges; they taught me so much about myself.

### **Valuing the experience**

Doing my PhD abroad had an impact on the way I saw things and the way I perceived knowledge. It was an experience that had its pros and cons, but overall it was a worthwhile experience which benefits go beyond the academic. This way of thinking may not have occurred to me if I had gone back to do my study in my home country; I might have done my study far better and in a shorter time, as it would have been in my mother tongue, and issues related to my command of the English language would not have interfered with my study. However, I may have missed the critical thinking and the reflection on my own learning process. These two capabilities, which I obtained by being here, were essential for my personal development. In addition to making me more open minded, they helped me to gain a better understanding of my surroundings and myself. In the following sections, I evaluate and analyse three significant aspects that had a noticeable influence on my learning.

### **Being an international student**

Being in a new academic atmosphere, in addition to being in a new country, is a unique experience. Communicating with people of different nationalities in English was not easy. My experience proved the opinion of Mazzarol (1998) that the decision to study abroad is a vital decision that not only affects students but also their families; in my case it not only affected me, but also had its impact on my family, including my husband, my daughters and my parents. My daughters have been brought up in a foreign country where they are introduced to education not in their mother tongue. My husband has had the chance to continue his study as well, though he had to quit his well-paid job and accompany the children and me.

It is important to note that when I discuss international students in this article, I am not generalising but only reflecting on my experience as one person in a heterogeneous cluster where there are so many cultural values, beliefs and languages. A cluster of

international students, as Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2013, p.86) suggest, provides a source of diversity in a university with their various cultural and educational backgrounds.

The presence of international students would expose domestic students to different cultures, and the interaction between domestic and international students would not only lead to deeper understanding of each other's culture but also develop networks that are mutually beneficial in terms of exchanges of information, ideas and support in the future. (ibid, p.86). As they join a domestic university in the UK, USA, Australia or any other country, international students bring with them their prior knowledge, different experiences and learning approaches, and in many cases different mother tongues (Lindsey et al, 2008). Coming from various backgrounds, international students communicate with their lecturers and supervisors in ways different from those of home students. A study from the USA shows that international students tend to show more respect to their supervisors and faculty.

This respect for advisors and faculty could be the result of the IGSs' [international graduate students] cultural background or educational system "... [They] might not feel comfortable interacting with their advisors or faculty on a casual level because of the strong respect they have for them" (Nguyen, 2013, p.102). In my experience such diversity works to the benefit of both home and international students. Alongside developing friendships between the two groups, such interaction with international students helps domestic students develop their cognitive skills and vice versa (Luo and Jamieson-Drake, 2013). By the same token, international students' awareness with regard to the use of the local language (in this case English) is developed. Being part of the latter group, it was a significant experience for me to be with home students and other international students who were not from my home country. This developed my understanding of different cultures. Being members of a group of people from different parts from the globe, we managed to create a respectful community in which we were introduced to each other's cultural values, culturally important events and even traditional dishes.

### **Critical thinking**

'Critical thinking' is a broad term and according to Huang (2008), "students and lecturers have different understandings of the term". More importantly, Huang (2008, p.3) claims that 'critical thinking' is a wide term and there is no one absolute definition to clarify what the term means. Hence in this paper, I adopted Glaser's (1941) definition of critical thinking:

The ability to think critically, ..., involves three things: (1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experiences, (2) knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) some skill in applying those methods. Critical thinking calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends.

Teaching approaches differ from one country to another, influenced by different cultures, values and customs. For international students, part of being in a new culture is having to get used to a new teaching approach to which many of them are not accustomed. Moreover, the educational systems in many Asian countries discourage learners from critical engagement (ibid, p.3). Therefore, along with their experience as international students, those who come from countries where the educational system adopts more of a transmission approach, critical thinking becomes a new challenge to deal with.

Ramburuth and McCormick (2001, p.346) point that there are differences in the way Asian international students learn and their Australian peers do, and that these differences can be linked to the cultural values of collectivism and individualism, which affect the preference of learning approaches of the two groups. Bringing in their previous learning experiences which are different to their experience in the host country, international students tend to have more of an in-depth approach to learning in comparison with Australian students (ibid, p.346). Doing postgraduate studies in western countries requires students to implement critical thinking throughout their learning journey. In my previous learning experience, my goal as a student was to find the key answer for each question and to make sure that I wrote down the answers in the exact way we had been told and taught. Since I started to study in the UK, I became more encouraged to question the given answer and to justify my opinion. I have learnt to look for answers not only in the textbooks but also beyond them. Learners in the western countries are introduced to such skills earlier than their peers in other parts of the world; for me these were fundamental skills in my PhD journey.

Such skills were not solely linked to my study but they affected the way in which I started to look at the wider world. I refrained from taking everything I came across as a true story. Paton (2001) claims that Asian students, who come from countries where the transmission approach is widely deployed, adopt certain levels of individualism as they engage in critical thinking which is widely perceived as ‘the preserve of western’ noun needed (ibid, p.36). For me critical thinking skills were associated with the British way of teaching. Huang (2008) alludes to the relationship between international students’ level of English and the application of critical thinking in their study. Paton (2011, p.37) agrees with this when he expresses the view “that English establishes a certain methodology of expression of critical thinking but this is only a methodology, not the critical thought”.

The challenge posed by the need for critical thinking is one of the most important experiences I encountered. Applying critical thinking was not an easy task in the beginning, as challenging my own knowledge and questioning the information encountered was difficult. Having said that, it turned out to be a useful approach in the academic field as well as in everyday life. The role of critical thinking beyond academia is also expressed by an Indian participant in Patron’s study (2011, p.32):

To create one’s own approach you must have a critical approach in university and in life. It should be encouraged but it’s missing in the university system here.

Having done my undergraduate study in my home country, I agree with this opinion. The educational system in my country does not place great emphasis on critical thinking. The question I often ask myself is: By the time I am back at my university in Saudi Arabia, will critical thinking skills be part of the teaching approach? Getting used to thinking critically, I began to understand some of the benefits of the way I had been taught before coming to the UK. Having experienced the importance of critical thinking, I am planning to make it a life habit and will do my best to encourage my own students to apply it in their learning journeys and later on in their lives. Critical thinking is not only significant for postgraduate students, but to undergraduate students as well; therefore, I intend to encourage all my students to do this. In addition to concentrating on text books and the notes taken during lectures, I started to become an independent learner as I stopped looking at what I came across as guaranteed facts and started to question, evaluate and look for more knowledge. I learned to respect others’ points of view even when they conflicted with mine.

## **Two languages**

I began learning English when I was as young as five, however, the new thing I learnt during my study in the UK was to have internal discussions about the same topic in two different languages. This ability emerged as I became more exposed to English than I had been before. Even though English is still a foreign language to me, having my mind working in two languages greatly benefited my study. Being able to use resources in two languages was one of the major advantages. According to Bialystok and Craik (2010, p.22) “[s]peaking more than one language does indeed appear to have a beneficial effect on aspects of cognitive control”.

Another interesting benefit was language-related understanding; I came across this notion when we were discussing research ontology and epistemology. Since the time I was in high school, I have been used to using English-English dictionaries and I tried not to learn the meanings of unfamiliar words from the direct translation of a word into Arabic unless it was too complicated. When words or phrases were too complicated, I would have the meaning translated into Arabic, so that I understood the concept well. At that stage, I realized that I needed the advantage of knowing two languages and I started to welcome Arabic thoughts into my academic realm. There are some topics which I understand better in English and others which work better in Arabic.

According to Grosjean (1996, p.6) thinking can be language specific. For instance during my first year as a PhD student, my friends and I used to discuss the ontology and epistemology of our research. The definitions of both terms in English were not working for me, and most scholars gave similar definitions. At that stage I was unable to ‘digest’ the difference between ontology and epistemology. The two following excerpts (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010) the first a definition of ontology and the second a definition of epistemology, are an example of what caused my ‘indigestion’: 1) “[a] philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality—what can be known and how. The conscious and unconscious questions, assumptions, and beliefs that the researcher brings to the research endeavour serve as the initial basis for an ontological position” and 2) “a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower. An epistemology includes how the relationship between the researcher and research participant(s) is understood”. Hence, I sought help from my mother tongue and the terms started to make sense and I was able to see the difference clearly. Beyond academic writing, I found that each language has its own imprint on my writing and also on my discourse; there are certain topics I can write more freely about in English and others I that am more comfortable with when writing in Arabic.

## **Acknowledging the experience**

Besides the fact that I learnt so much throughout my PhD journey, the image of it as cracking a nut helped me overcome many obstacles and difficulties. With the awareness that cracking a nut involves harder work than having a piece of cake, I can see when I look back that there were several situations where I could have taken different decisions. For instance, I could have carried out my study in my home country where I was accepted for a position in a local university, but I preferred to do my study abroad. If I had chosen the first option, I would not have faced so many language difficulties; nor would I have been in a foreign culture where I had to get used to a new place and new educational approaches. I would have had to read in English at some point throughout my study, but that would not have been a problem as I have

been learning English as a foreign language since my pre-primary days. However, the main skill I would have lost is the critical thinking approach, which one is exposed to only on a small scale in learning approaches at home. In addition, doing my PhD at home would not have directly improved my English language and I would have had to take more courses in English until I reached a satisfactory stage. Hence, I will never regret my decision to do my study abroad, and I am satisfied with what I have learnt so far and am willing to learn more in the future.

One of the other things I could have done differently would have been during the first nine months of my first year when my social interaction with home students was at its lowest. I should have gone to the office of the Dean of Students and looked at the services they provided to international students, rather than waiting as I did for new PhD students to arrive. There could have been the potential to meet home students who are willing to interact with international peers.

### **Cracking the nut!**

With all the experiences and new knowledge I obtained throughout my four-year PhD journey, and the sparkle of reflecting on that journey, I am now able to think of the future and see the impact of the odyssey on my future. In the future, I will try to go with a smaller cake, where I can strike a balance between my desire to improve the educational system in my home country and my passion for creative writing. I am looking forward to doing a follow up study on some of the themes that emerged from this study.

This experience has made me aware of the importance of the international dimension in higher education, and how we can learn so much through reflecting on our own learning process. This is the first time I have critically reflected on learning, and it will not be the last; I will consider it a core approach to adopt once I go back to my home country. I will share my experience with my students and will encourage them to think differently and learn from themselves and their own learning process, mistakes and decisions.

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