

## **Tips for International Students' Success and Adjustment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Compared to domestic students, international students possibly encounter more specific challenges, such as language barriers, acculturative stress, separation from loved ones, homesickness, and discrimination. However, current literature has very limited recommendations for international students to overcome their adversity. Based on my clinical, research and teaching experience, this article categorises recommendations into three groups: cultural adjustment, language barriers and developing social relationships. The aim of this article is to suggest pragmatic ways to assist international students in their process of adjustment to a new education environment. Educators are also encouraged to share these recommendations with their international students.

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As a lecturer who teaches and mentors international students and as a former international student myself in the United States, I am able to understand international students from multiple perspectives. Being an international student is never easy. Separation from loved ones, cultural clashes, discrimination, financial difficulties, homesickness, language barriers, legal status problems, and an unfamiliar educational system are formidable challenges that often trigger feelings of frustration, insecurity, confusion, and sadness. Researchers have addressed international students' struggles from a variety of perspectives, incorporating ideas of acculturative stress and discrimination (e.g. Ruble and Zhang, 2013; Wei, et al., 2012). However, comparatively few studies have provided pragmatic recommendations for international students. Based on the information gathered from my personal, clinical, research, and teaching experience, I list several recommendations for facilitating international students' cultural adaptation and academic success in the Western educational system.

### **Cultural Adjustment**

New international students tend to encounter challenges due to cultural differences in how tasks are carried out in different societies, ranging from buying food to getting a vehicle. Upon arrival in a new country, most international students go through an adjustment process that is usually referred to as culture shock (Zhang and Goodson, 2011). Being faced with multiple new tasks and roles in an unfamiliar culture and being far away from family and friends can induce feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and frustration. One suggestion for overcoming culture shock is to keep ties to one's home culture by communicating with family and friends, watching films from one's home country, and finding foods from one's home culture. From my consultations with different staff at several institutions' International Student Centres, joining student societies and building connections with fellow international students are also very helpful in the transition process.

Research has consistently shown that international students tend to underutilise Student Counselling Services because of lack of awareness of their own psychological well-being,

language barriers, cultural stigma, fear of disclosing information to strangers, and a poor knowledge of mental health problems and services (Ellis-Bosold and Thornton-Orr, 2013; Tung, 2011). Therefore, it is important for international students to understand that utilizing mental health services is common in Western cultures. Additionally, ignoring emotional difficulties associated with culture shock may give rise to clinical mental health problems. The students should also realize that professional psychological services have a very strong emphasis on protecting students' mental health information and any information shared by students is confidential.

Some college counselling centres have bilingual therapists or therapists who are multiculturally competent and are able to work with diverse students. Therefore, international students are encouraged to turn to professional help on campus in order to address their adjustment problems. International students who are uncomfortable with individual therapy might consider joining counselling groups with other domestic or international students in the counselling centre. According to previous studies, counselling services are an effective means to facilitate the cultural adjustment of international students (Tsai and Wong, 2012). Therefore, international students should consider psychological services as a viable option.

## **Language Barriers**

Many studies have consistently identified the language barrier—including writing, reading, listening, and oral skills—as one of the most critical factors affecting academic performance of international students (Ku, et al., 2008). In particular, speaking English as a second language (ESL) in front of others can be anxiety-provoking, and this fear can limit the ability of international students to develop social relationships and participate in class discussions.

### *Speaking and Listening*

For new international students with low English proficiency, it may be helpful to learn English by using the mass media of the local culture, such as television, films, and online video sites. At first, watching programmes with English subtitles can facilitate students' English acquisition with visual and auditory stimuli. At the same time, using subtitles in students' native languages may hinder their ability to learn English vocabulary. Once students are more confident in their listening comprehension, they can turn off the subtitles and see how much they understand. Further, international students tend to experience fear of speaking English because of their imperfect pronunciation and grammar (Brown, 2008). Results from my qualitative research on Chinese international student adjustments suggest that some of international students feel uncomfortable speaking English in front of their international counterparts, who are more likely than local students to tease or judge them (Lee, 2014).

For these reasons, International Students can try some psychological interventions to overcome their anxiety, such as deep-breathing exercises and mental rehearsal (preplanning speech in their mind before saying it) before expressing their ideas. Role reversal, such as visualising a foreigner learning to speak their native language, can also help international students. For example, in the case of a German who is studying in China and learning to speak Mandarin, a local Chinese student might be likely to be patient with the German student and appreciate his or her interest in the Chinese language. From my experience, the

same is true for local students in the USA—many report an interest in communicating with international students.

Another way to reduce anxiety and increase confidence is to read self-affirmation statements, which is an empirically supported cognitive behavioural intervention (Hall, Zhao, and Shafir, 2014). Self-affirmation statements can help people improve their self-image and sense of control over the anxiety by realizing their self-worth (Pietersma and Dijkstra, 2012). Some statements can include, “My accent is just part of my style and it is fine,” “I have a right to say whatever I want,” and “I am a capable student and I know it.” Finally, although some people discriminate against individuals with imperfect English (Lee and Rice, 2007), it is important to remember that imperfect English should never be a source of shame as it takes time to develop one’s English proficiency.

### *Reading and Writing*

Some ESL international students have a difficult time reading because of lack of familiarity with English vocabulary, lack of background knowledge in a subject, a weak understanding of complex syntax and polysemous words, and lack of equivalent words between English and their native language (for example, the English word “insight” does not have any equivalent word in Chinese). Some international students find it helpful to look up the meanings of unfamiliar words in a dictionary and write them in a textbook in their native language. They may also explain concepts to themselves in their native language or use reading strategies such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review). While these strategies can be effective, reading skills take time to develop, and it is common for international students to go through an adjustment period to advance their reading skills, especially at the beginning.

The multicultural experiences of international students can potentially enhance their creativity in academic tasks, such as writing and class presentations (Lee, Therriault, and Linderholm, 2012). However, international students may produce fractured language when trying to convey their ideas in writing. Besides learning vocabulary and grammar to improve their writing skills, international students also need to understand rhetorical differences between their culture of origin and the host culture. For example, the organizational aspects of an essay, such as an introduction, evidence to support claims, and a conclusion, can be as important as grammatical correctness. It is crucial for international students to communicate with their lecturers about expectations for their written work and to read sample papers if possible.

As a lecturer, I give students an option to hand in a preliminary draft of their papers one week before the deadline. I then give them comments to guide a revision of their paper. Students who choose to participate tend to produce higher-quality papers when they turn in their final drafts. International students can try to discuss a similar plan with their lecturers. In addition, international students may use writing centre services in their universities by working with writing tutors on their papers and attending workshops on writing skills. It can also be helpful to ask for help from other students who are strong writers to edit their papers. Moreover, some International students might exchange papers with domestic students to provide feedback to each other.

## **Developing Social Relationships**

Another cultural adjustment involves social relationships. Many international students hope to make friends with domestic students in order to learn better English and learn about local culture. However, in addition to differences in English proficiency and perceived discrimination, international students from different cultures tend to have expectations that differ from local students' concerning friendship, romantic relationships, personal space, and other social domains (Williams and Johnson, 2011). Therefore, friendships between international and domestic students tend to be somewhat rare.

To understand differences in communication styles, international students can observe domestic students' conversations in different situations, learn what domestic students usually talk about, and try to discuss similar topics. As domestic students may not be familiar with the culture of international students, they may refer to stereotypes and come across as ignorant and so international students should try to be patient in such situations. Some international students stated that they do not know how to find opportunities to develop friendships with domestic students and other international students. Perhaps international students can create opportunities to meet new friends via several routes, such as working part time on campus; initiating conversations with classmates, flatmates, neighbours, and staff; joining different interest and/or religious groups; participating in extracurricular activities such as sports and music; and socializing with students in hall of residence lounges. Furthermore, making friends with domestic students who are interested in learning another language or culture can be beneficial. For example, domestic students taking a Chinese class may be interested in making friends with Chinese students in order to practice Mandarin.

Another possible barrier described by international students is lack of common topics to discuss with domestic students. Some experienced international students have suggested that new international students can relate to domestic students by discussing their disciplines, courses, films, TV shows, sports, religion, and even simple topics such as weather and food. In addition, using social network tools such as Facebook and Twitter can help international students develop friendships. Some international students have reported that they do not understand the differences in communication styles with local students, which discourages them from initiating conversations. From a sociological perspective, US culture is a low-context culture, which means it relies on explicit content of verbal messages to convey ideas. In contrast, many Asian cultures are high-context cultures, which use nonverbal cues and contextual references to communicate. For example, expressions such as "How are you?" "What's up?" and "How's it going?" usually mean a simple "Hello" unlike gestures intended to elicit a prolonged conversation.

A number of international students have mentioned cultural misunderstandings and conflicts related to having romantic relationships with local students. For example, a Taiwanese international student thought that she was a Caucasian domestic student's girlfriend because the two had held hands and kissed; however the Caucasian student thought that they were just casually dating. To understand romantic relationships in the United States, International Students need to learn cultural differences related to dating. US culture differentiates between casual dating and committed relationships. Physical and sexual intimacy can occur in either relationship, and sexual activity does not necessarily imply commitment. Many Asian cultures, including Chinese, Japanese, and Indian, tend to be more conservative with respect to dating and avoid physical intimacy before both parties are committed to a relationship. Therefore, when engaging in romantic relationships, international students may need to be

aware of several issues. First, United Kingdom and United States have a low-context culture in which communications are more direct and explicit (Richardson and Smith, 2007). International students may consider openly asking their partners about the relationships in order to attain a mutual and clear understanding of their levels of commitment. For example, international students may ask, “what are we,” “where is this relationship going,” and “are we boyfriend and girlfriend yet?”. Although it may sound simple to have such an open conversation about relationships, it can be a difficult process for international students from high-context cultures. This cultural difference in communication styles leads to the second issue of assertiveness. Many international students come from a collectivistic society which highly values conformity and obedience to their groups while discouraging being assertive for personal needs (Lee and Ciftci, 2014). In romantic relationships, international students from collective cultures may have a difficult time setting interpersonal boundaries, such as rejecting hugs and kisses and saying ‘no’ to a date. Some international students may need to develop assertive communication skills and understand that rejecting others in a polite and respectful way is socially appropriate in most of the individualistic cultures. For example, to reject a date, international students can simply say, "I'm so sorry, but I can't make it". Third, international students should have a mind-set to expect cultural differences, or even cultural clashes, when developing romantic relationships with domestic students. Besides seeking professional counselling, international students can also talk to friends who are domestic students to understand more about the local culture of dating and relationships.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to enrich the resources available to international students and encourage educators and educational officials to present these recommendations to international students. Although international students face many challenges in their studies, they have plenty of unique strengths, such as their international perspective, independence, courage to live in a foreign country, and multilingual skills. Many international students are very hardworking and devoted to learning. The recommendations in this article may reduce the barriers experienced by international students in order to facilitate their academic success.

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