

“We are a ghost in the class”: First Year International Students’ Experiences in the Global Contact Zone

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Abstract: This article draws on data collected during case studies involving six undergraduate international students. It uses the academic literacies framework to examine how international students (re)negotiate their student identities. Based on the concept that Australian university classrooms are global educational contact zones, the study reinforces the urgent need to shift from existing narratives that focus on international students’ perceived language and literacy deficits. Participants demonstrated positive student identities by successfully mediating disciplinary requirements. However, their transition was hindered due to insufficient opportunities for meaningful classroom interactions and lack of academic instruction and feedback. The findings suggest teachers are in the best position to address this gap through classroom pedagogies that accommodate learners from diverse backgrounds and facilitate inclusive learning environments. r

Keywords: academic literacies, deficit view, international students, classroom practices, student identity

Introduction

Based on the concept of a global educational contact zone, this study examined how first-year undergraduate international students (re)negotiated their student identities. By global educational contact zone, we refer to an Australian university where “teachers and students with disparate cultural backgrounds and identities meet and interact” (Scotland, 2014, p. 36). Clifford (1997) defined the term contact zone as spaces where “the making and remaking of identities, takes place” (p. 7). Educational contact zone is an appropriate description for Australia’s current tertiary education, whereby global student mobility has transformed universities into multicultural learning environments. In 2016, around 24% of Australia’s university cohorts were international students (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). The worldwide demand for international

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education is expected to continue rising, and by 2020, international enrollments in Australia are predicted to be 30% higher than current figures (Chaney, 2013).

Australia's tertiary sector currently has a favourable reputation, but also faces global competition from other native English-speaking (NES) countries and emerging competition in Asia, increasing the importance of meeting international students' expectations and learning needs (Chaney, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013; Productivity Commission, 2015). In 2007 and 2013, two Australian symposiums involving key stakeholders examined the knowledge gaps surrounding tertiary international education (Australian Education International, 2007). One major outcome was the Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities (hereafter called the Good Practice Principles). The principles recommend institutions ensure effective and regular opportunities for academic interaction and cross-cultural discussion within disciplinary learning settings, and integrate discipline-specific language enhancement and academic skills socialization into curricula (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009). As educators working with international students at tertiary level, we have seen examples of successful implementation of the Good Practice Principles. However, challenges have been reported by international students, particularly with regard to their academic literacy practices in a new academic community.

Since these symposiums, researchers have continued to examine whether changes to higher education policies and internationalization strategies are effectively catering to students from diverse backgrounds. Subsequent studies (e.g., Elliot, Reid, & Baumfield, 2016; Gale, Mills, & Cross, 2017; Leask, 2013; Wingate, 2015) have suggested universities have yet to adequately respond and persist with a deficit approach toward international students. The deficit approach assumes non-native English speaking (NNES) students' language proficiency and previous educational experiences do not align with the disciplinary requirements and literacy practices in English-speaking universities, and thus, are barriers limiting their capacity to adapt to new academic learning environments. This assumption makes it difficult for NNES students to feel accepted by their new academic community if their student identity is challenged based on linguistic and cultural stereotypes (Gee, 2004; Gorski, 2010; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013; Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabdic, 2017).

One way to investigate issues surrounding international students' literacy and learning is through the academic literacies approach. This approach was developed by Lea and Street (1998) to guide researchers in their efforts to inform and enhance tertiary policies and strategies. It is founded on the understanding that literacy and learning are social and cultural practices highly influenced by the way students see themselves culturally, linguistically, and academically, as well as how they perceive that others' view them. The approach has been advocated as a suitable framework to explore how international students mediate tertiary global learning environments (e.g., Harper, Prentice, & Wilson, 2011; Hyland, 2013; Leask, 2013; Wingate, 2015) because it emphasizes the significant effect institutional and disciplinary pedagogies and practices have on students' experiences and identities.

Literature Review

Universities are unique discourse communities in which disciplinary traditions, conventions, and values are often implicit. This poses challenges to first-year students in terms of understanding course expectations and requirements. In addition, the inextricable links between literacy, learning, language, and culture add extra layers of complexity for NNES students not part of the dominant linguistic and cultural group. Nevertheless, global educational contact zones bring valuable opportunities for all students to develop cultural understanding and intercultural communication skills in preparation for future employment in culturally diverse work settings (Chaney, 2013; Productivity Commission, 2015; Wingate, 2015). The aim of this study is to determine factors that help or hinder first-year international students' academic socialization and identity construction to provide insights into effective pedagogies and classroom practices that address the Good Practice Principles, support student learning, and enhance intercultural communication and understanding.

The Academic Literacies Approach

To account for the complex nature of tertiary literacy and learning, the academic literacies framework encompasses three overlapping models: study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies. Study skills refers to the deficit view of literacy, which assumes knowledge is transferred, not constructed, and is regarded by researchers such as Lea and Street (1998) and Wingate (2015) as the starting point of academic literacy. Academic socialization extends on study skills by acknowledging students apply skills they already possess to develop new literacy practices relevant to specific disciplines. The third model, academic literacies, moves beyond the concept of socialization with the view that successful engagement in a new academic community requires students to learn "new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge" through meaningful engagement with teachers and peers (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158). The underpinning belief of the academic literacies approach is that while the study skills and socialization perspectives provide some insight into the nature of learning, they are insufficient to fully understand the epistemological demands of tertiary study. However, researchers (e.g., Gale et al., 2017; Harper et al., 2011; Leask & Bridge, 2013; Street, 2013; Wingate, 2015) have argued that study skills remain the underlying approach guiding tertiary curricula and instructional practices and, consequently, have called for urgent changes to disciplinary pedagogies and increased teacher training as essential strategies to better accommodate first-year students' learning needs. The academic literacies approach is a valuable research framework to examine university classroom practices because it considers students' voices, and the inherent link between language, literacy, and learning.

Student Identity

A key concept in the academic literacies framework is its emphasis on the central role identity plays when students transition into new learning environments. Positive identity construction is influenced by students' academic experiences, relationships with teachers and peers, and how well they understand and engage in the literacy practices recognized

and valued by their new academic community (Gee, 2004; Gu, Patkin, & Kirkpatrick, 2014; Marginson, 2013; Scotland, 2014). According to Gee (2004), identity construction is facilitated through “meaningful and value-laden action, interaction and dialogue” (p. 48). Lizzio (2011) described identity negotiation as invisible classroom transactions and advised that teaching pedagogies that enrich student identities are fundamental in curricula design. Scotland (2014) suggested that renegotiating existing identities requires agency and adaptability, to resolve potential disruptions that can occur due to unfamiliar pedagogies and discourses in global learning environments.

The student voice can provide insights into how students construct new identities in global contexts where assumptions from others regarding their skills and knowledge may have already been culturally determined. In a study by Gargano (2012), undergraduate international students in the United States reported a fragmented and ambiguous learning environment due to inaccurate stereotypes about their learning styles based on nationality. Despite these challenges, the participants viewed interactions with peers as advantageous in learning how to negotiate transnational spaces as global citizens. Similarly, Pham and Saltmarsh (2013) found that although undergraduate international students studying in Australia believed that their new academic community perceived them as “others,” they demonstrated student agency and used the skills and knowledge they already possessed to successfully mediate courses and achieve their academic goals. Marginson (2013) also observed that globally, mobile students actively developed multiple identities and considered both positive and negative experiences as opportunities for personal growth. These findings emphasize the need for universities to increase their understanding of international students’ capabilities and self-determination, rather than assuming their cultural identities are barriers to learning.

Identity is also influenced by whether students feel a sense of belonging within their academic community. Inclusive classroom practices and teachers expressing interest and concern have been found to significantly influence students’ feelings of belonging (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015; Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015; Slaten, Elison, Lee, Yough, & Scalise, 2016). A sense of belonging can increase students’ participation and capacity to become independent learners and improve academic achievement, whereas lack of constructive feedback and perceived cultural insensitivity can have long-lasting discouraging effects (Baik et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Yefanova, Montgomery, Woodruff, Johnstone, & Kappler, 2017). Elliot et al. (2016) compared the idea of belonging to nurturing a relocated plant into new soil. If the plant is to not only live, but also flourish, it requires initial care to adapt and grow.

However, a longitudinal Australian study conducted between 1994 and 2014 revealed that, compared with domestic students, international students were less likely to experience a sense of belonging (Baik et al., 2015). These results highlight Doherty and Singh’s (2007) contention that academic staff need to acquire “a more nuanced understanding of who internationally mobile students are” (p. 18). More recently, Wingate (2015) argued that achieving inclusive classrooms has been difficult because teachers have “insufficient knowledge of students’ previous experiences, backgrounds and values” (p. 110), and perceive student identities based on nationality. This suggests it is essential

that universities increase staff training and support so teachers can implement classroom practices appropriate for global tertiary contexts.

Although recent studies have contributed to current empirical knowledge regarding the important role positive identities and belonging play when students transition into global learning environments, there is still a paucity of research examining the experiences of undergraduate international students from diverse fields of study and cultural backgrounds (Gargano, 2012; Gu et al., 2014; Slaten et al., 2016). Wingate (2015) reported that most student identity research focuses on postgraduate and Asian cohorts, which has led to gaps in current understandings of first-year student experiences.

First-Year Transition Strategies

All first-year students can benefit from institutional and teacher support and inclusive classroom practices as they work towards becoming valued members of their academic community (Australian Education International, 2013; Harper et al., 2011; Hocking & Fieldhouse, 2011; Tobell & Burton, 2015; Wingate, 2015). Wilson et al. (2016) described the first year of university as “one of the most significant transitions in a student’s life” (p. 1024), and found international and domestic students prioritized forming connections with teachers and peers, understanding assessments, and locating learning resources in their first semester. This suggests that 1 week of orientation and the provision of literacy and learning support outside the disciplines cannot adequately cater for first-year students’ needs (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Tobell & Burton, 2015; Wingate, 2015; Yan & Sendall, 2016). Accordingly, researchers recommend first-year transition strategies be embedded into course curricula to facilitate inclusion and engagement—for example, structured opportunities for cross-cultural interactions, literacy and language instruction and modeling, and teacher feedback (e.g., Glass et al., 2015; Leask & Bridge, 2013; Wingate, 2015). However, previous studies argue that few institutions apply these strategies across the disciplines, which has increased the demand for investigations into higher education learning environments in an effort to promote change (Leask & Bridge, 2013; Safipour et al., 2017; Street, 2013; Tobell & Burton, 2015; Wingate, 2015).

The university where this study was undertaken has responded to its diverse student cohorts with internationalization strategies that endeavor to support international students’ integration into the university community. A strategy to address the Good Practice Principles has been the introduction of Australia’s first compulsory, university-wide foundational program to assist international undergraduate students’ transition into their disciplines. The program involves language and communication courses taught by English language instructors who aim to develop students’ communicative competence and understanding of disciplinary literacy practices and conventions (Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, Walkinshaw, & Lobo, 2015). Dunworth (2013) described the program as an effective approach to position language and academic literacies development as core teaching and learning activities. The university also provides internationalization strategies and resources for academic staff that recommend curricula and classroom practices to address language barriers in the classroom, and to promote engagement among staff and students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. According to

Leask (2013), research that examines the efficacy of tertiary internationalization strategies has been scarce. This study contributes to addressing this research gap.

Research Method

The research setting was an Australian university located in South East Queensland and data were collected over two semesters at one of the university's campuses. Around 20% of the current student population across the university are international enrolments. A multiple embedded case study design was chosen as an appropriate method to gain in-depth insights into international students' perceptions and academic experiences. The rationale for using multiple case studies was to include students from a range of backgrounds, where each participant represented one unit of analysis embedded within the research setting. In addition, Yin (2009) advised that involving more than just one or two cases in a study can increase the reliability of the research findings. Ethics approval was obtained from the university Research Ethics Committee where the research took place. Participants provided informed consent and were given pseudonyms.

Participants

Participants were undergraduate international students in their first year of university in Australia. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from a variety of cultural and educational backgrounds and disciplines (see Table 1). Yin (2009) referred to purposive sampling as screening, and describes it as an essential step to yield data relevant to the research aims.

Table 1. Six case study participants.

Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	Age	Degree
Trang	Vietnamese	Male	22	Bachelor of Business
Gabriella	Thai-Japanese	Female	20	Bachelor of Hotel Management
Jaili	Chinese	Female	21	Bachelor of Civil Engineering
Filipe	Brazilian	Male	21	Bachelor of Science
Camilla	Brazilian	Female	22	Bachelor of Pharmacy
Meko	Japanese	Female	21	Bachelor of Environmental Science

Trang and Gabriella were in Australia for their entire degrees, and Filipe, Camilla, and Meko were one-year study abroad students. Jaili was participating in a university partnership program that provided the opportunity to complete 2 years of her degree in Australia. Meko and Trang had enrolled directly into the university based on their language test results, the International English Language Testing System for Trang, and the Test of English as a Foreign Language for Meko. Filipe, Camilla, and Jaili's enrolment pathway was a 10-week direct-entry English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) offered by the university's language institute. Gabriella enrolled after completing two semesters of a Diploma of Hotel Management at the university's pathway college.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using structured and semi-structured interviews. Following Yin's (2009) recommendations for case study research, strict research protocols were used to ensure data collection and analysis; each case adhered to the same set of systematic procedures so that the research could yield valid and reliable evidence. Each student participated in eight to ten 20-minute weekly structured interviews during their first semester, which provided detailed insights into participants' literacy practices and learning experiences as they were occurring. The interview schedule contained nine open-ended questions repeated each week to collect systematic field notes. The longer, semi-structured interviews extended the scope of the study, with each student participating in five 30-minute, audiorecorded, one-on-one interviews over two semesters. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility and time to probe for further details regarding participants' classroom experiences and relationships with teachers and peers.

Case study data were uploaded into NVivo 11 software and analysed using a thematic approach (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). As suggested by Yin (2009), each case was analysed individually, and the results compared across the cases to provide a broader picture of the research issues. Data analysis involved an iterative process with the researchers reading and rereading the interview data to establish emerging themes and to gain a detailed picture of participants' educational contexts and experiences. The themes were coded and further analyzed to identify patterns within each case, and across the six cases. To minimize researcher bias, it was essential not to make assumptions as to what the data might reveal (Duff, 2014; Yin, 2012). To maintain researcher objectivity, the process of reflexivity advocated by Yin (2011) was used during the analysis and interpretation to ensure personal values did not influence the research findings, and no judgments were expressed by the researchers about any of the participants' views or actions. In addition, a strict interview transcription protocol was followed, and the researchers double-checked all verbatim quotes with the audio data for accuracy.

Results

Understanding Disciplinary Literacy Practices

In the first weeks of Semester 1, participants acknowledged they needed to use new approaches to learning. They discussed the differences between studying in Australia compared to their home countries and described taking between 10 and 15 courses each semester at home, and attending classes for 8 hours a day, 5 days a week. Although their Australian university required just four courses each semester, they were under no illusion that less class time would mean less work. Camilla observed: "I don't think it is free time because in Brazil, I don't have to write a lot of assignments." Meko identified distinctions she noticed in the first few weeks of semester:

[In Japan] just go to class, get what the lecturer said and just prepare for exams. So it's easier, more passive than here. Because we take so many courses, the examination [in Japan] is really easier to pass. And written

assignment [in Japan] is much easier than here because... here we, they really check [for plagiarism] strictly, but in Japan not as much.

The four students who completed the ELICOS and college pathway programs expressed complete confidence they had acquired the literacy practices they needed during their pathway courses. At the start of the semester Jaili reported:

It's not difficult for me here because I was studying in the [university's] language institute. I didn't need to write references in China. Just write what you want to say. I think it's good here because you can make the reader to know where those sources come from and well, it's good to have evidence to support my opinion.

Gabriella was also satisfied she understood disciplinary expectations, especially when she appeared to know more than some domestic students at the start of the semester:

At first [when I arrived in Australia] I had no idea how to write the academic stuff. I learnt it there [the Vocational Education and Training course]. They teach me really good. So when I came here [the university] it is ok, the academic writing. I think is much better than the first year local students. I know how to reference and I know how to write. There are many local students, they have to ask the teacher about it [referencing] many times. They even just lack the basics."

Trang and Meko were initially concerned about their disciplinary skills and responded by spending time at the start of semester attending library workshops and using self-help resources related to academic writing, time management, and writing using sources. Their confidence increased when they became familiar with disciplinary expectations as the semester progressed. Trang noted:

Much more academic here. I think it's really necessary for those rules [academic integrity]. In Vietnam you know, most students literally copy and paste and it's like really bad. I prefer here, it's more fair and reflect your real potential.

By the end of Semester 1, Meko believed she was in a better position to write her master's dissertation in English when she returned to Japan:

I should think more if I write something. That's the importance of reading. I have learnt how to organize and write the good way with a nice structure and consistency in the whole message.

Participants not only understood Australian academic culture, they also seemed to prefer it. Jaili reflected:

My writing skills have been improved because I read a lot of books. You read a lot it becomes easier to write. When I study in China, I don't

read anything. I just write what I want to explain. No any theory to support or evidence to support. It's very boring. It's kind of like I make it up. And, while I'm reading I am learning more knowledge. It's good to have evidence to support my opinion.

Camilla and Filipe believed their new literacy practices would be advantageous when they returned home. Filipe described how he had changed his approach to academic writing:

I think it's very useful to see how to organize my ideas because I didn't do it in Brazil, I just started writing things. But now I need to focus on the structure and follow my ideas to make it better to read, to see if I had all the information linked with my references and my own opinion.

International students' understanding of disciplinary conventions and requirements is a factor that may affect academic socialization and academic performance. For the students who attended the ELICOS and college pathway courses, their belief that the courses provided sufficient preparation for tertiary study indicated an encouraging start for their transition. Meko and Trang, the two students who enrolled based on their language test results, were the least confident regarding their academic skills, but addressed the gaps in their understanding by independently using university resources. The participants' acknowledgement regarding the need to adapt to their new learning environment, and the way they embraced and valued disciplinary literacy practices, provided a solid foundation for their identity reconstruction.

Mediating Courses and Assessments

The students demonstrated student agency by attending most classes, reviewing course content before and after lectures, and reading course materials they perceived were relevant to participate in class, undertake assignments, and study for exams. All their courses included written tasks, presentations, and mid-semester exams, and a challenge they encountered was completing multiple assignments at once. Although this was a new method of assessment compared to their previous academic contexts, it was not unexpected and participants understood they needed to spend the majority of their study time preparing for and completing assessment tasks. In particular, they dedicated time to researching library databases to locate academic sources for written assignments, and while they found the academic writing process time consuming, they persevered and endeavored to complete assignments to disciplinary standards. Meko commented, "I think the long time it takes to do the research is normal."

Participants described other ways they mediated course assessments. For example, Camilla just passed her first mid-semester exam and failed her second one, even though she thought she knew the content. She had not experienced multiple choice exams before and realized they contained more questions and topics than she anticipated. She adapted her approach by increasing her revision of course lecture slides and disciplinary vocabulary, and was relieved to score 35/50 in her third mid-semester exam. Jaili also failed her first mid-semester exam, as did her Chinese friends taking the course. She became worried when 2 weeks passed and the lecturer had not provided exam feedback. Her

solution was to form a study group with her friends. She had noticed domestic students studying together and was eager to adopt a similar approach, believing group discussions would help her identify and correct errors. Initially, Jaili was disappointed because her friends resisted and preferred to continue studying on their own. She persevered and eventually convinced them to practice problems and calculations together to prepare for their final exams. She was delighted to have changed her “Chinese way of studying” and reflected that discussing course content with peers helped increase her understanding.

As the semester progressed, when the participants began to receive passes or higher for written assignments, it reinforced their belief that time spent on course assessments was worthwhile. They also discussed the importance of being independent learners because, as Camilla observed “teachers don’t explain anything about academic skills except to say we must reference and we’re expected to know how to answer assignments.” The participants’ weekly accounts of their experiences across the disciplines confirmed this view, as there was little evidence of embedded language or literacy instruction. Participants expressed both surprise and disappointment that most teachers did not provide exam and assignment feedback. Filipe worried, “This is terrible. I can’t prepare for my exams if I don’t have feedback.” Meko recounted, “They [teachers] don’t comment. Just ‘I recognize your efforts’ or ‘excellent’ or ‘good’.” Gabriella described her experience:

I just get the mark, I didn’t get feedback. It’s getting normal for me but it’s strange. Normally in Japan we would get the feedback and check which part we got the mistake. Yeah, I want the feedback. If they can tell the feedbacks that would be better. Then I won’t make the same mistake anymore.

The exception regarding the provision of instruction and feedback was the language and communication courses. Course content included language enhancement and a process approach to writing instruction that involved an essay outline and draft. Teachers provided verbal feedback on outlines and extensive written feedback on drafts, before students submitted a final essay for assessment. Participants valued the feedback because it specifically addressed aspects of their language and literacy they needed to improve. Trang reflected, “My tutor said I was too descriptive. More critical analysis. I need to discuss the influence of the theory, not just what the theory is.” The participants described the feedback in detail, as well as how they responded to it—for example, improving use of articles and tense, being careful to avoid non-academic English, writing clearer topic sentences, and increasing the use of cohesive devices within paragraphs. Filipe explained, “I know what the teachers are looking for now.” The participants’ appreciation for opportunities to receive language and literacy instruction and feedback suggests disciplines should address this gap in current curricula.

Another challenge participants shared during Semester 1 was working on group assignments with domestic students. They described similar experiences and expressed genuine surprise when domestic groupmates did not attend lectures or reply to messages to organize group meetings. Gabriella put forward a strong opinion:

Not coming to the meetings and not doing stuff. I would tell [other international students] don’t do the group assignments with the local

students. We, all Asian students say don't do with them. They are lazy. Most of them, not all of them.

Two days before Trang was due to submit a group written assessment, the domestic students in his group replied to him for the first time, after he had tried for weeks to contact them. He was unhappy when they insisted on delegating most of the assignment to themselves, even though they knew Trang and his other groupmate, a Korean student, had already divided the task into four equal sections and completed their parts. Trang's interpretation was "they think Asian students couldn't do the task or wouldn't do it very well." On the day of submission, the domestic students sent their parts to Trang to put together because "they didn't have time." He was shocked, and then annoyed, that they had not addressed the assignment criteria correctly, or acknowledged sources. His domestic group mates dismissed his attempts to point out the sections that did not align with the tutor's instructions, and argued that references were not required. Trang submitted on time after spending many hours fixing their parts, and adding in-text references and a reference list.

Filipe also reported his experience working with domestic students who refused to meet to organize a group presentation. Filipe prepared his part on his own, and was panicking the day of the presentation:

I'm scared [of what will happen]. I know my part but the flow won't be good. They don't care. They said they just want to pass. Not even sure we will.

The week after the presentation he reported what occurred:

They [domestic students] had no eye contact with the audience at all! Just reading [from their papers]. Weird. The Professor said I was the best speaker. It was amazing. He said I spoke so well, and naturally, and he couldn't tell English was my second language. The whole class agreed. I'm so happy.

The participants found it stressful, as well as puzzling, working with students who overlooked disciplinary conventions and criteria, and were content to "just pass." It was a situation they had not previously encountered in group work in their home countries. According to Filipe, students should know "the purpose of group work is to discuss with others and get different views because it is important to share." At the end of Semester 1, the participants resolved to avoid group work with students who were not prepared to cooperate.

The students responded to the challenges they faced by taking responsibility for their own learning and focusing on completing assignments to the level they believed was expected. They took advantage of feedback when it was given and used university resources when required to increase their knowledge and skills. At the end of Semester 1, their academic results suggested they successfully transitioned into their new learning environment. Meko was "surprised but happy" to receive three high distinctions for her three courses. Trang received two distinctions, a credit, and a pass and was pleased with

his efforts. He suggested “most international students, we are working very hard.” Jaili received a high distinction and three credits, and Gabriella described feeling “proud” of two credits and two passes. Camilla was satisfied with two passes, a credit, and a high distinction, but also mentioned being used to higher marks in Brazil:

I don't like my marks in here, I'm just a middle student, I don't like that. And I study hard but studying in English it's complicated. So it's hard but I think I do my best, so it's all right.

Filipe achieved two passes and a distinction. He also failed one course, which he took responsibility for after not attending the last 5 weeks of lectures. He regretted that decision:

I realised I didn't know the meaning for some words [in the exam] specifically about biological systems. I knew everything in Portuguese I just didn't know the vocabulary in English. So if I had attended the class, for sure I would know the vocabulary so it was my fault. But it's my first time in an international university so I don't feel disappointed.

The deficit view of international students assumes their previous education and cultural backgrounds constrain learning. The findings above contradict this view, with participants demonstrating student agency and educational capital, which enabled them to achieve first semester results they believed reflected their ability and efforts.

Ghosts in the Classroom

In contrast to the confidence participants demonstrated when they discussed course requirements and assessments, their experiences in the classroom during Semester 1 exposed a disparate narrative. All participants described feeling isolated in class, being scared and afraid when they communicated with NES students, and feeling insecure about their intercultural competence. These challenges were further compounded by lack of opportunities for meaningful engagement and interactions in class. According to Camilla, international students “are a ghost in the class. We go in we go out no one sees us.”

In the first weeks of Semester 1, participants expressed reluctance to ask teachers questions in case they could not understand the answers. However, it did not take long to change their minds once they had opportunities to consult with teachers before and after class. Participants agreed that most teachers were welcoming and supportive. Despite their anxiety easing somewhat in terms of interacting with teachers, communication with domestic students remained a constant source of worry. Jaili described how she felt:

I'm just afraid. I'm afraid they [domestic students] cannot understand what I am talking about. I'm also afraid I cannot understand what they are talking about. And I'm afraid they don't like other people to ask them anything. It's like we have nothing in common. What is private, what would make them unhappy or uncomfortable? I'm not sure so I'm just afraid.

The uncertainty participants felt when they interacted with domestic students in the classroom was a significant challenge that they found difficult to overcome. While they were content to describe their courses and literacy practices in the interviews, invariably the topic they wanted to discuss the most was how to engage with domestic students. Camilla, Filipe, and Gabriella described instances where they attempted to start conversations with domestic students in class, but were met with disinterest, or they had a short conversation and then the following week the same students ignored them as if they had never spoken before. Gabriella often tried to interact with domestic students:

They're [domestic students] not interested in me. They don't really care. I can see that. I feel like, I think a divide. Because if they were interested in us, I will be happy.

Filipe also expressed his disappointment:

When I talk to domestic students, my heart starts hurting, because I feel like they do not like talking with non-native speakers. I thought it would be a little bit different.

A common theme across the cases was this struggle to understand domestic students' lack of interest in them. Initially, participants shared the belief that their imperfect English and lack of intercultural understanding caused domestic students to feel uncomfortable. The participants routinely blamed their own English proficiency as the reason for non-existent or awkward classroom interactions with domestic students. However, by the end of Semester 1, participants began realizing that communicating with teachers and other international students was not as scary as they thought, and language was not a barrier to engaging in their courses and meeting assessment criteria. The unpleasant interactions with domestic students during group assignments also prompted a slight shift away from the perception that the lack of engagement with domestic students was solely their own fault.

Based on their understanding of Australian academic culture, participants had expected opportunities in tutorials to discuss course content, form relationships with NES students, and enhance their intercultural communication. Jaili noted at the end of Semester 1:

Well [expected] more time for discussing. I was thinking I could talk with other countries people and practice my English and make a lot of friends. So, not happening. A little bit disappointing. The teachers do talking a lot. We don't have time to discuss by ourselves. The teachers talk and the students listen.

Despite their intense disappointment regarding the lack of classroom interactions, the participants remained resilient and directed their attention towards their studies and building friendships with other international students. NNES students come to English-speaking countries with the reasonable expectation of engaging with NES students. For the international students in this study, the classroom contact zone in Semester

I did not provide such opportunities, and instead prompted feelings of doubt and a divide between international and domestic students. This emphasizes the importance of inclusive learning environments that facilitate opportunities for all students to enhance their intercultural communication skills.

New Feelings of Belonging

In the first weeks of Semester 2, everything changed. The students arrived for their interviews excited to share positive classroom experiences that had transformed the disappointment of Semester 1 into happiness that their academic community knew they were there and cared about them. For example, when one of Gabriella's teachers showed genuine interest, she reported feeling comfortable in class for the first time:

He cares about us, each of us. Sometimes he asked us, the Asian students, "did you understand?" Like that. And I feel like oh, he is worrying about us, he can see us, he is thinking of us.

Filipe described a conversation with a teacher who recognized his efforts:

She [my lecturer] started talking about how hard it must be for me to learn a different language and give a seminar to native speakers. I think this was the only time I had an interaction with a Professor for the fact we were overseas students. That's the best moment for me to feel part of the university.

In Semester 1, Camilla had believed international students were ghosts in the classroom. One lecturer shifted this perception:

In the first lecture the Professor put "welcome to Brazilian students" on the first slide in Portuguese and in English. I think for the first time, "oh! Someone knows we are here!" And every lecture she put in [examples of] Brazil and she says "oh in Brazil it is working this way." So she worrying about how it works in your country, I think it's nice. This semester they know about us, the Professors. Last semester they didn't know about us, who we are. I think when some people is interested in what are you doing in another country it's amazing. It changes the experience.

These responses to new classroom experiences suggest teachers play a vital role in nurturing students' feelings of belonging. Although the teachers' actions were small, the impact was significant because they created positive emotions participants had not previously felt in the classroom contact zone. However, across the cases, there was only one more example of positive classroom engagement. In Semester 1, Filipe's "heart hurt" when he tried to communicate with domestic students. In the first week of Semester 2, one of his courses held a field trip, and initially he felt apprehensive because he was the only international student. He described feeling happily surprised when he connected with the other students:

It [the field trip] broke the barrier. I'm more free now. I can breathe. You don't feel so ashamed when you've got interaction with your classmates. You know them and you feel comfortable. You have a voice.

Yet, the toll Semester 1 had taken on Filipe's emotions emerged when he reported feeling worried that he would arrive in class the week after the field trip and no one would talk to him. He was "amazed" when the opposite occurred:

I had good interactions with everybody together. I can feel that I'm just a student, normal. Like the other students and I can do whatever they can do. Before I was, I don't know, somebody apart.

Filipe's experiences reinforce the imperative of embedding opportunities for peer engagement within course content. In addition, the simplicity of the classroom practices which fostered participants' feelings of belonging revealed that even small efforts of inclusion eased the strong feelings of stress and apprehension they experienced in Semester 1. These findings highlight the responsibility of teachers to provide inclusive classrooms environments, which can help reduce communication barriers and bridge the divide perceived by international students.

Discussion

A salient finding in the cross-case analysis was that despite participants' diverse backgrounds and fields of study, their experiences were similar across the disciplines. These findings reposition the deficit view of international students and expose disparities between first-year students' needs and classroom practices, reaffirming previous research recommending institutions pay critical attention to improving how they support first-year students' transition into global learning environments. Globally mobile students are often high achievers in their home countries (Marginson, 2013; Tobell & Burton, 2015), and as such, the transition into English-speaking universities may challenge their student identities. The participants in this study responded to this challenge and took responsibility for their academic socialization by extending on previous educational experiences and acquiring new literacy practices and ways of learning. Although some participants failed early assessment tasks, they demonstrated student agency and engaged in their new learning environment by attending class, fulfilling course requirements, adhering to disciplinary conventions, and responding to teacher feedback. Similar to findings by Gargano (2012) and Pham and Saltmarsh (2013), the students in this study embraced Australian academic culture and believed their new knowledge and skills would be advantageous for their future education and careers. Participants' first semester academic results not only indicated they understood and valued disciplinary literacy practices, their achievements also reinforced their perceptions of themselves as hardworking students committed to their education.

As highlighted by the overlapping levels of the academic literacies framework, the transition into tertiary learning environments requires more than understanding and participating in disciplinary requirements. First-year students are learners and by that definition, need guidance, feedback, and support, as well as opportunities to engage with

teachers and peers to create feelings of acceptance and belonging (Dunworth, 2013; Glass et al., 2015; Gu et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2016). Although the participants positioned themselves as motivated and willing, their first semester classroom experiences indicated university disciplines had not yet operationalized an academic literacies approach. At the same time as participants were constructing positive student identities and educational capital in their courses, they encountered classroom environments across the disciplines that created feelings of doubt and isolation. Assumptions of deficit, lack of opportunities for language and literacy instruction or teacher feedback, and difficulties interacting with peers constrained participants' access into their new discourse community. In Semester 1, the classroom was not a contact zone at all and instead, challenged participants' student and cultural identities. This resonates with Scotland's (2014) view that identity renegotiation in global learning environments may be disrupted if interactions between teachers and students in the contact zone are not encouraged and maintained. Nevertheless, consistent with previous studies (Marginson, 2013; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013), the participants' sense of self remained strong, and their pragmatism and resilience allowed them to put disappointment aside and focus on achieving their academic goals.

Although the national symposiums and Good Practice Principles have prompted increased institutional support for international cohorts, there was a contradiction between reported classroom practices and recommended first-year strategies of embedding opportunities for cross-cultural interactions and academic support into curricula. There was evidence of language and literacy instruction and feedback in the language and communication courses, but as Fenton-Smith et al. (2015) pointed out, these courses cannot be viewed as a "silver bullet" for first-year transitioning and should be considered one part of a whole of an institution's approach. This study also demonstrates that disciplinary curricula must do more to facilitate engagement among students from diverse backgrounds. Slaten et al. (2016) suggested that academic achievement is a critical factor in enhancing international students' sense of belonging. However, even when participants in this study began constructing strong student identities as a result of fulfilling course demands, feelings of belonging were the missing piece of the puzzle that hindered them from flourishing in Semester 1. In contrast, critical moments of inclusion and recognition in Semester 2, which had been absent in Semester 1, "broke the barrier," whereby participants no longer felt like "ghosts." Significantly, the most striking aspect was the simplicity of the events that prompted this shift—acknowledgement on a lecture slide, a kind word from a teacher, or the chance for meaningful engagement with peers. These findings support evidence from previous studies (Glass et al., 2015; Yefanova et al., 2016; Wingate, 2013) regarding the essential role of teachers in fostering students' sense of belonging.

Conclusion

This study challenges the deficit view of international students and argues that it is the learning environment that has the deficit. The participants in this study willingly and successfully adapted to disciplinary requirements, and as suggested by Gargano (2012), their educational capital was not defined by nationality. However, disciplinary curricula and classroom practices also need to adapt, and the pressure for universities

to improve how they cater for culturally diverse students remains strong. We would argue that teachers in the contact zone are in the best position to address this challenge. International education should be a tool to recognize diversity, promote respect for others, and allow different perspectives to be shared (Glass et al., 2015). Classrooms provide the ideal setting to achieve these goals. As Wingate (2015) explained, teachers are experts in their discourse community, and are valuable resources who require investment and support if they are to successfully implement university internationalization policies and strategies. Consequently, it is essential that universities educate instructors regarding their responsibility to understand who their learners are, acknowledge diversity in their classrooms, encourage and facilitate intercultural communication, and provide effective feedback. Teachers require opportunities for professional development and need to be supported through disciplinary pedagogies and curricula that are underpinned by the academic literacies approach. Implementing such changes across the disciplines is necessary so that first-year international students not only transition into their disciplines, but also develop positive student identities, feel a sense of belonging, and achieve the graduate outcomes they, and their institutions, intend for them to gain.

Street (2013) and Wingate (2015) reflected that the slow pace of change towards an academic literacies approach makes it critical that researchers persevere in advocating inclusive classroom environments. This research contributes to current understandings of first-year international students' academic socialization and identities across university disciplines in global contact zones. The study shows that while advancements still need to be made to achieve the required shifts in disciplinary pedagogies, it is possible for teachers to make a significant impact in enhancing students' sense of belonging through small actions and inclusive practices that demonstrate acknowledgment, interest, and genuine care. While the case studies yielded valuable insights, a research limitation was that the time-consuming nature of case study research meant only a small sample of the research population could be included. Further research examining the adoption and efficacy of classroom strategies that facilitate meaningful intercultural engagement and that nurture students' sense of belonging is required. Future studies could also explore professional development that enhances teachers' understandings of their diverse student cohorts, and investigate teachers' experiences in the contact zone, including factors that help and hinder their capacity to provide inclusive learning environments.

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