

Adventures into the Unknown: Exploring the Lived Experience of East Asian International Students as Foreign-Accented Speakers in Australian Higher Education

Eunjae Park
Steven Hodge
Helen Klieve

Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

Second language (L2) international students are frequently blamed for miscommunication and even stigmatized and marginalized due to the way they sound. However, little is known about how their accent contributes to the L2 lived experience at foreign universities. Taking a mixed methods phenomenological approach, survey ($N = 306$) and semi-structured interviews with participants from East Asian countries ($N = 5$), this study reveals that their personal journey as foreign-accented speakers can be traced through a four-stage process: (a) surprise, (b) anticlimax, (c) learning to survive, and (d) feeling empowered. The first two themes are a period wherein participants experience high levels of stress and anxiety because of having to fit into new learning environments. The last two themes refer to a stage where they developed the ability to survive with increasing self-confidence. Practical implications for improving the campus climate for all L2 students are discussed.

Keywords: accent discrimination, communication barriers, East Asian students, foreign accents, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad is a common aspiration in this globalized era, whether the experience is a short or long period. According to Hunley (2010), numerous

studies suggest that this experience provides a wide range of benefits for L2 international students, including improving their language proficiency, developing intercultural awareness, achieving a greater understanding of international affairs, enhancing adaptability, and contributing to personal growth. However, the shift from the controlled environment in which they prepared for their study abroad to unfamiliar settings where language and culture are drastically different is highly complex. Research into the process of settlement and social and academic integration into new university settings have revealed psychological issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress, feelings of worthlessness), homesickness, loneliness, cultural differences, social isolation, academic performance stress, racial discrimination, and language barriers (Hunley, 2010; Jean-Francois, 2019; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Park, 2016; Sawir et al., 2012). Beginning a new university life in a foreign country can be daunting and overwhelming.

A considerable amount of research has been dedicated to understanding the challenges faced by L2 students during their transitional period, often concluding that limited language proficiency has a direct and adverse influence on their social and academic life on campus (Dooley, 2010; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Moon et al., 2020; Sawir et al., 2012). This contention implies that limited language proficiency is at the heart of international students' adjustment difficulties. Although L2 students' language use is clearly an element in these difficulties, it should not be viewed in isolation from its social and cultural context (Miller, 2003). Spoken language, the focus of this study, is neither simply a means of communication nor a linguistic competence. Rather, spoken language, when perceived as leading to troubled communication emerge as lived issues that initially produce deeply felt concern in L2 students.

L2 students' accent and speech style serve as a signal in their evaluation as an interlocutor that can undermine successful communication (Kettle, 2013). Having an accent can deprive interactions of meaning (Miller, 2003). Accent has been blamed for miscommunication, and it may become the root of stereotyping, racism, and other types of discrimination (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Even so, little empirical research has been conducted on how accent plays out in L2 students' social and academic life at foreign universities (e.g., Kettle, 2013; Park, 2016). The present study explored L2 East Asian students' lived experience as foreign-accented speakers at one Australian university. The research sought a deeper understanding of /the students' journey from the immediate challenges of being a foreign-accented speaker to the overall impact on their life experience.

BACKGROUND

East Asian International Students

The number of international students in Australia has greatly increased over the past two decades, from 60,914 in 1999 to 442,210 in 2019 (Australian Government [AG], 2020). In 2016–2017, these students contributed around \$28.6 billion dollars to the Australian economy, with 70% of that income from the

higher education sector (AG, 2017). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government policies restricting access to cross-border education will impact future enrolments and may decrease the number of students undertaking tertiary programs in Australia for some time. However, Northeast followed by Southeast Asian students (henceforth East Asian) have consistently represented the largest student population in Australian higher education (AG, 2017). A large number of East Asian students are from English as foreign language countries (EFL), where English does not play a significant role in daily communication.

Communication Barriers Faced by L2 East Asian Students

While moving to a new country and being immersed in new cultures may be exciting, the language differences can make L2 students feel powerless and even intimidated in their transitional period (Park, 2016). One of the most noticeable aspects of L2 students' spoken language is their accent. Having an accent is an integral part of L2 acquisition (Derwing & Munro, 2009), and once established, it is difficult to change (Bourdieu, 1977). At the same time, "accent has been blamed for all sorts of things" (Derwing & Munro, 2009, p. 476). It has been deemed the cause of miscommunication and used as a cover-up for prejudice, racism, and discrimination (Derwing & Munro, 2009). While L2 students' spoken language skills are frequently taken for granted, this important area has been under-reported in the literature.

An extensive body of literature on L2 students' transition has repeatedly problematized accent as one of the causes of broad language barriers and racial and ethnic discrimination (Dooley, 2010; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Houshmand et al., 2014; Jean-Francois, 2019; Sawir et al., 2012). These studies, although they are not accent-specific, suggest that communication with L1 faculty members and peers was often one-way and exclusive, placing the communicative burden on L2 students to carry all responsibilities within the communicative act (Lippi-Green, 2012). Upon arrival in a host country, L2 students need to operate through their L2 within unfamiliar settings, and thus anxiety, loneliness, and an initial loss of confidence are common experiences (Hunley, 2010; Ryan & Viete, 2009). Therefore, non-reciprocal communication—where students are not heard or received by faculty members and peers—can have deleterious effects on self-esteem and self-representation, resulting in significant delays in their social and academic adjustment (Kettle, 2013; Miller, 2003).

While L2 students need confidence to actively participate in classroom discourses and group work, interactions with L1 students may be disempowering and alienating. L2 students have reported that their opinions were not included in decision-making or taken seriously due to their speech and accent, evoking a feeling that they were "looked down upon" (Dooley, 2010; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Sawir et al., 2012). Some students sensed an assumption of low intelligence and competence because they were not given important tasks in group work and suffered from a fear of being blamed for miscommunication, which later became

a motivation to keep silent in classrooms (Park, 2016). Due to apparent unwillingness on the part of L1 students to engage in interactions with them, many believed that L1 students do not appreciate or respect their efforts to communicate and made judgments concerning their proficiency and abilities (Park, 2016; Sawir et al., 2012). Consequently, feeling excluded, passively or deliberately, being blamed for miscommunication, and detecting unwillingness to communicate on the part of others reduced participation in classrooms and inhibited relationship-building with L1 students (Jean-Francois, 2019; Park, 2016; Sawir et al., 2012).

In a similar vein, interactions with faculty members were sometimes frustrating and hurtful (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Houshmand et al., 2014; Jean-Francois, 2019). A student in Jean-Francois's (2019) study reported: "If a white student makes a mistake, they assume it is a mistake... but if an international student makes a mistake, they assume that you are at-risk or you are dumb" (p. 1075), and she believed her accent was the main cause of underestimation. East Asian students can feel nervous and anxious about speaking up in classrooms (Kettle, 2013; Park, 2016), possibly because they have not been exposed to student-centered learning (Moon et al., 2020). Asian students in Hellstén and Prescott's (2004) study expressed that they were treated /like children and were not valued as people. Given these findings, Hellstén and Prescott (2004) concluded that such experiences can be a threat to the students' self-esteem and sense of security in classrooms.

Accent has significance beyond the struggles of L2 students for participating in educational contexts and maintaining self-esteem. English as the dominant and preferred medium of instruction in education reproduces standard English as the norm, which largely undermines the way L2 students sound because they do not abide by the standard (Kettle, 2013; Lippi-Green, 2012). According to Bourdieu (1977, p. 648), for L2 speakers, competence is not just "the right to speech, i.e., to the legitimate language which is also the language of authority (but also) the power to impose reception." Meaningful communication and learning can take place when L2 students are accepted as legitimate members of the community. However, those who are not deemed "legitimate speakers" can be silenced, excluded, or marginalized compared with the dominant group (Bourdieu, 1992), creating an unequal social hierarchy in classrooms; L1 students (the dominant group) versus L2 students (the minority group). The role of accent in social positioning and power relationships appears to play a role in shaping L2 students' lived experience.

Therefore, the main research question guiding this study is "what is the experience of East Asian international students as foreign-accented speakers in Australian higher education?," with a primary focus on the challenges and coping strategies.

METHODOLOGY

To gain rich understanding of L2 East Asian students' lived experience, a mixed method phenomenological research approach was adopted. The initial survey outcomes provided a broad overview of the experiences of a large group of

participants ($N = 306$), establishing a basic account of where the accent-related challenges existed and how participants mitigated those challenges to navigate the unfamiliar academic settings. Analysis of these findings paved the way for an in-depth phenomenological investigation into five participants' experiences as foreign-accented speakers. Focusing on the nature of "being-in-the-world," hermeneutic phenomenology served as the primary lens for explicating the experiential meaning of the phenomenon; this is done by exploring the structure of individuals' lifeworld as they live it and by exploring the meaning they make of their existence and their social world in its wholeness (van Manen, 2016). The following sub-sections explain how the concepts of hermeneutic phenomenology were applied in the study.

Procedure and Participants

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was gained from the Human Ethics Committee at the selected university (Reference number GU:2018/159). The selection criteria were: (a) students from EFL countries enrolled at the university and (b) those who started second language acquisition after childhood. Since age of learning (AOL) is a crucial predictor of the degree of accentedness, the critical period of L2 learning was considered for inclusion of this study (Patkowski, 1990), and demarcated at the age of 15.

A total of 306 valid survey responses were collected through purposeful and snowballing techniques (Cohen et al., 2018). From the 78 participants who indicated a willingness to take part in follow-up interviews in the survey, five participants who reported a wide range of experiences via the survey were selected. These participants came from diverse cultural backgrounds, aged 24 to 37 years and studying different academic disciplines, and had been in Australia for several years (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants' Profile

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Time in Australia	Nationality	Level of education	Field of study
Ann	F	24	4 years	Vietnam	Undergraduate	Business
Tim	M	22	3 years	Thailand	Undergraduate	Linguistics
Melissa	F	37	10 years	Korea	Undergraduate	Nursing
Jennie	F	30	6 years	China	Postgraduate	Education
David	M	29	5 years	Japan	Doctorate	Criminology

The participants had varying levels of language proficiency and views on their communication skills as well as accent strength (Table 2). Among the participants, Tim was the only one who had a previous study experience in an L1 academic environment (in the United States).

Table 2: Background Knowledge in L2

Pseudonym	Self-reported communication skills	Accent strength	IELTS (Overall)	Experience in other L1 countries
Ann	Poor	Mild	6.0	X
Tim	Very good	Weak	7.5	O
Melissa	Good	Strong	7.0	X
Jennie	Very good	Weak	8.5	X
David	Average	Strong	6.5	X

Data Collection

Data were collected at one regional university campus between November 2018 and February 2019. Adhering to the principle of hermeneutic interviewing (e.g., collaboration with participants through conversations about the phenomenon; van Manen, 2016), three semi-structured interviews were conducted at three-week intervals over a period of up to four months. With interview questions guided by the initial survey findings, interviews focused on four key areas relating to (a) experiences before and after arrival in Australia, (b) recent or current challenges as an L2-accented speaker, (c) developed strategies for coping with the challenges, (d) views about and attitudes toward themselves as an L2-accented speaker. Interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of one participant who spoke the same L1 as the lead author (Korean). Each interview lasted from 90 mins to 3 hrs and was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service in an attempt to construct texts that accounted for participants' experience in its wholeness. Consequently, the concrete experience of participants and the meaning their experience held for them were explored.

Data Analysis

All data were considered as part-to-whole when uncovering or isolating thematic aspects of the phenomenon by following van Manen's (2016) techniques of phenomenological reflection. For example, three particular steps were followed to analyze the transcript and identify themes. The first step was the "holistic/sententious" approach where the researcher tried to "capture the fundamental and main significance meaning of the text as a whole" (van Manen, 2016, p. 93). The "selective/highlighting" approach was the second step, characterized by re-reading the text several times and highlighting statements or phrases that could be considered "essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described" (van Manen, 2016, p. 93). The last step was the "detailed/line-by-line" step, where each sentence and paragraph was examined.

The highlighted statements, phrases, and paragraphs were treated as thematic statements.

The researcher used a research journal during data collection and recorded notes, memos, and comments during data analysis in developing themes prior to composing linguistic transformation. The review of the journal material assisted in clarifying ideas and elaborating on possible connections between different data types. Subsequently, through the horizontalization process, each statement was given equal value, and repetitive and overlapping statements that were not relevant to the phenomenon studied were set aside (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher clustered the meaning units and thematic statements identified by the data readings, which captured various elements of participants' lived experiences and created themes in a more phenomenological manner. Through this process, an interpretive description of what it is like to be a foreign-accented speaker was developed. Throughout the process, NVivo (Version 12) was used to manage data and facilitate analysis.

Writing as a phenomenological method, the analysis continued when the researcher started writing (van Manen, 2016). To bring meanings to the surface, the researcher frequently wrote, reviewed, studied deeply, and rewrote the findings to uncover meanings in data and reveal hidden complexities.

Both member-checking and sharing transcripts with participants were conducted to enhance the integrity of the data (Cohen et al., 2018). To reduce obvious bias in the interpretation of the data, analysis of one of the transcripts was verified by another researcher involved in this study.

RESULTS

From 15 transcripts, 545 significant statements were extracted and clustered into four main themes: (a) surprise, (b) anticlimax, (c) learning to survive, and (d) feeling empowered. In the following, participants' responses were not corrected for grammar.

Surprise

In this cluster, participants focused on their experience before and soon after arrival in Australia. All participants were excited about residing and studying in Australia. At the same time, feeling out of place, feeling surprised at different English sounds, and struggling with accent and pronunciation were commonly experienced by participants.

For the majority, communicating and learning through L2 within unfamiliar settings was the biggest concern. Feeling out of place was a common experience for participants. David recalled his experience of feeling overwhelmed:

I couldn't even imagine how much it would be different from my culture and my first language. So, I thought I studied English a lot, but I found my English was not enough. I couldn't understand 100% and convey

what I wanted to say. I felt completely out of place. Native students are way more fluent in writing, speaking, and communicating and so forth. I thought I would have to work hard, study hard to compete with them.

Since Australia was a completely new country for him, he was worried about something beyond his imagination, something yet to be discovered. He realized that his English was not sufficient for communicating with others, despite his belief that he was well-prepared. His inability to communicate in classrooms made him feel out of place, with an increasing sense of insecurity in classroom interactions. He became concerned that he was facing some sort of barrier to studying with L1 students because they generally have better literacy and oracy skills.

Tim, who had previous experience in the United States, was excited to start a new life in Australia and initially was not worried about his L2 ability. However, he started to notice that the way he spoke English was different from most L1 speakers and he began to feel out of place: “When I first arrived, I was not very comfortable. I think, maybe feeling out of place? I just felt that I speak so much differently than other people on campus.”

For participants coming from the EFL context, where the experience of English is limited to the controlled environment of classrooms, feeling surprised at diverse kinds of English could continue over months or even years. Tim mentioned: “I would say very different [L1 accent]. I am not gonna lie. I was amazed when I first arrived in Australia; this is so hard to understand what my friends and professors are saying?” Jennie also stated: “It sounded very different and very unique speech habits like mumbling and slurring...I was so frustrated, and it was so difficult to follow.”

Although participants detected differences in accent between other speakers and themselves, paying detailed attention to their own speech sounds was beyond their competence. Melissa recalled the early period of her stay in Australia:

I didn't care because I had to think about what to say in English all the time. So, as long as I could speak something with subject, object, and verb, I couldn't think about other things because thinking about grammar was difficult. But I realised accent is important later I could speak and think in English a lot faster than before.

Melissa's account hints that, with increased exposure to the local language, she slowly understood the significance of accent. She implied that she was subconsciously aware of the notion of accent and pronunciation in communication, although she prioritized constructing grammatically correct sentences over producing intelligible sounds, because paying extra attention to these other linguistic areas was too demanding. In Tim's and David's cases, they were unaware of the notion of accent and thus did not view themselves as even having an accent. David commented, “accent was completely out of the picture.”

Anticlimax

For the participants, new challenges were mounting as their transition unfolded. Participants shared their experiences related to accented English that contributed to shaping their social and academic lives on campus. *Feeling heightened demands in communication, experiencing stereotyping and discrimination, and difficulties in forming friendships with L1 students* were all issues resonating in their accounts.

Feeling heightened demands in communication was a multilayered issue and appeared to be linked with other areas such as anxiety, low confidence, and limited vocabulary. Ann, who evaluated her own communication skills as poor, found many factors played a role in her interactions with tutors:

When I tried to explain my opinion to my tutor, I had to repeat many times. I think I picked the wrong words, and my pronunciation wasn't clear. I lost confidence every time I had to repeat. I felt... "oh... again..." I couldn't even ask any questions. So, I felt I was studying alone. I tried to google things I didn't understand. But you know sometimes information we find from the internet is not really correct.

As Ann indicated, her L2 performance and academic performance were weakened by her limited vocabulary and her feelings of tension, anxiety, and low confidence. While she tried hard to make herself understood, being asked to repeat her statement many times seemed to increase her sense of malaise. With a range of issues playing out simultaneously, seeking information from the internet appeared to be the last option for her, and her academic isolation is indicated in her comments: "I felt I was studying alone." Jennie and Melissa also expressed similar experiences with L1 students. Jennie stated:

I still feel a bit shy because they're going to pick some mistakes I make, and they know my grammar and pronunciation mistakes immediately. So, I feel I'd better not talk much. Sometimes, we have a group discussion... We still don't want to communicate too much with Aussies, especially the young girls because they speak so fast.

Working with L1 students was not straightforward for Jennie because of her shyness and fear of making mistakes. Intense concerns over making mistakes and a limited ability to comprehend were related to her reluctance to work with L1 students in class, especially with young female students.

In culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, participants were required to work with a wide range of students. In the process, experiences of stereotyping and discrimination were another problem evident in participants' accounts. When communication breakdowns took place, one common reaction to the participants' struggles was blame for miscommunication. David recounted:

They [L1] just move to another topic, pretend things not happening. Just because we speak English as a second language... doesn't mean we're always wrong and we're the ones who always make mistakes and when

we don't understand, they simply blame us. You know feelings like someone just looks down on you. But when they think it's my fault... it's kind of true... I mean sometimes, not all the times.

In David's interpretation, the strategies of moving on to another topic and overlooking miscommunication were a sign that L1 students did not want to engage with him. As he explicitly acknowledged, miscommunication could not always be attributed to him. Unfortunately, experiencing dismissive behaviors and withdrawal from the communication process evoked frustration and undermined self-esteem.

Some L1 students reacted to the participants in an offensive manner. Stereotypes associated with L2 speakers could emerge unexpectedly. Melissa stated:

She was talking about a singer and a concert that she would go to. I told her that I don't know the singer and all of sudden... she said, "if you don't speak English, why are you in Australia?" I was like... "What?? I didn't say I don't speak English. I just don't know the singer." I was so offended when she said that. She didn't even listen to me carefully. She didn't say sorry and I was shocked.

While the L1 student certainly misheard Melissa, the response to her was aggressive and humiliating, assigning all blame to her. The response seemed to be triggered by pre-existing stereotyping associated with L2 speakers. Blame for miscommunication, judgment on her English, and receiving such an insulting response came as a shock to Melissa.

All participants expressed dissatisfaction in their relationships with L1 students. The participants experienced unresponsive and unreceptive attitudes during communication with L1 students. Tim believed that his American accent was a good conversation starter, but it did no more than that:

I'll be treated slightly differently from the local people. I kind of feel that: different vibes. I'm trying so hard to be their friend until one point I become tired... I was like, "F... it. I'm just gonna be friends with international student because they're more understanding about myself, and did not really make me feel bad about being myself or being who I am." I find that it's difficult to get along with local student just because of this look.

Even from the researchers' perspectives, Tim had a native-like accent. However, his experience of forming friendships with L1 students was not different from other participants. Although he showed a genuine willingness to mingle with L1 students, putting significant efforts into talking to them, he felt the interest was not reciprocated. Attributing such difficulties to his race rather than to accent, these experiences eventually stopped Tim from trying to build relationships with L1 students. He became reluctant to go beyond his existing social circle. Seemingly, he wished to protect his identity by refusing connections with L1 students.

Learning to Survive

Participants indicated that their struggles to fit into new learning environments were gradually transformed into a deep motivation to overcome the challenges. In relation to this critical point, three sub-themes emerged: *Disguising*, *self-protection*, and *being strategic*.

“Disguising” was a strategic response made by some participants to their communication problems. Melissa, Jennie, and Ann were motivated to pretend they were a completely new arrival to elicit more tolerant treatment from L1 speakers. Melissa elaborated:

I say, “I’m new here, I didn’t know.” I can tell they can be patient at least for those who are new. I sometimes say my English is not great. It’s one way to break the ice to initiate conversations. I see people become supportive and try to listen to me. I feel they wouldn’t judge me... and I don’t worry too much about making mistakes.

Melissa noticed that some L1 speakers were indulgent toward new L2 students. This observation prompted her to pretend that she herself was a new student in order not to provoke any negative reactions and feelings. Additionally, pretending to be a poor L2 speaker was one way of “breaking the ice” and taking the initiative in conversations and, further, to prevent misjudgments. In this way, she was able to manage her worries about communication demands and unjust criticism.

Self-protection (avoiding and distancing strategies) was frequently delineated within participants’ efforts to control communication. Being inspired by a “TED talk,” Tim reported that he intentionally avoided topics related to his and the listener’s ethnicity or nationality. As he explained:

I was inspired by Ted talk and I started using that as my guideline. I start a conversation and I will never bring up about my ethnicity or my nationalities. Not because I’m ashamed of, but it’s because I don’t want them to put me in a box or in a category. Because once they know that, they start forming this sort of stereotype in their head and they’d be like, Oh, you must be this guy, you must be this particular person.

In Tim’s words, stereotypes are mistaken ideas that people have about a certain group. He noticed that knowing a person’s ethnicity and nationality can possibly lead to unhelpful assumptions about that person. To prevent this, he affirmed that speakers should not raise any questions that could be related to their identity. As Tim highlighted, the main benefit of avoiding topics associated with each other’s backgrounds was “heading off” conversation that could connect with stereotyping tied to a particular group.

Jennie and Ann reported that they preferred working with co-national students, especially for group activities. They intentionally avoided being grouped with L1 students. Jennie recounted:

We’re concerned about some Australian students. They don’t regard Chinese students as very good. Some of them, I don’t mean all of them.

That's why we try to avoid them... Sometimes... to avoid myself being nervous or looked down upon.

Although Jennie tried not to overgeneralize her experience to the entire L1 community, she developed a defensive stance in relation to misjudgment and underestimation of herself and other Chinese students.

All participants believed that putting consistent efforts into improving their communication skills was important because placement in L2 environments by itself is not a magic key to enhance their language skills. "Real English" was what participants wished to acquire through movies, dramas, news, and YouTube videos. Since the English they had been trained in back home and the English in Australia contrasted, they sought familiarity with diverse English accents. David stated:

What I found useful was to watching movies and dramas, DVDs in English because it's real English, not fake English... like in CD or... English test. I learned a lot of expressions and vocabularies. It's helpful for speaking and listening. To improve my English listening skills, I try to watch dramas in English with subtitles. So, when I encounter the word I don't know, I can just search and understand what that mean and how that used and what context that word is used.

David utilized various resources to develop his communication skills. He compared a set of media resources he used and other learning resources, such as English test materials. Using a distinction between "real English" and "fake English", he emphasized the authenticity of some media resources that assisted in his articulation. He believed that media resources were useful for learning expressions and vocabulary for oral communication in a context-sensitive way.

Feeling Empowered

The participants eventually became resilient and strategic in managing the challenges they faced. They realized learning through difficulties, and improving skills through painstaking efforts were ultimately valuable processes. At the same time, the participants gained a wider perspective on the challenges faced by L2 students. *Communication difficulties are natural* was a sub-theme discerned in the data. Tim recounted:

I don't see it as barrier, but it's something that people make errors naturally when we talk. And if you're just like, "Oh, what did you say?" It's not always because of accent... it's because the speaker might just miss it because she was focusing on something else. It's not a big deal, I feel like. I know there are some people who abruptly respond to those students with accents though.

Acknowledging the social consequences for L2 students of having a different accent, difficulties were not perceived as a problem in principle, and were interpreted as a natural process in any communication to establish a mutual understanding. Participants appreciated that miscommunication could take place for a number of reasons—not solely because of the accent itself, but because the speaker’s message may be misinterpreted by the listener. Additionally, all participants used expressions such as “it’s part of my life,” and “it happens all the time,” clearly indicating that they believed miscommunication is a common phenomenon in their life experience rather than a deficit or failure.

Having L2 is valuable was another sub-theme identified in participants’ accounts. Although they had to endure tough times in unfamiliar settings as an L2-accented speaker, they eventually valued their L2 ability, irrespective of their level of accentedness or language proficiency. Ann stated:

I didn’t have much confident to talk to people and people’s accent made me so worried and even quieter student. Every time I didn’t understand people and people didn’t understand me, I was embarrassed and very sad. But being a second language speaker, I define this term positively, because when I go for travelling, I can meet more people and talk to people. After living in Australia, I can understand many accents and I like that. I think that’s like extra ability. I can’t have that ability if I just stayed in Vietnam.

While being an L2 speaker and not being able to accommodate different accents impeded her L2 performance, thereby creating stress for her, Ann held positive attitudes toward her experience and herself. Instead of concentrating on what she could not do, she placed much emphasis on what she had achieved and what she could do in the future because, without any challenges and aspirations to improve her circumstances in Australia, she would not have accomplished similar outcomes and developed such resilience.

Being proud to be L2 was also a common sentiment among participants. Although they felt their L2 skills were often taken for granted in Australia, they were proud of their ability to speak two languages. They felt neither ashamed of having a different accent nor wished to acquire a native-like accent because their accent indicates that they are bilinguals. Melissa mentioned:

As long as I can communicate with people in English and mingle with them, there’s no problem having a Korean accent. I see people with a Spanish accent, Italian accent... I think when they have these accents and speak English as a second language, that makes their linguistic ability valuable. I admire their effort to speak more than one language. And I feel proud of myself as well.

Melissa believed that having a different accent should not be an impediment to successful social interactions. She appeared to be successful in establishing and representing her identity as a Korean-accented speaker, although she was not

necessarily recognized as a “legitimate” speaker in the dominant language context. Noting that the ability to speak more than one language requires significant investment and long-term commitment, she affirmed that having an accent reveals underlying efforts to be bilingual and thus she felt proud of herself.

DISCUSSION

This study drew on the voices of five participants to understand their lived experience as foreign-accented speakers in an Australian university. Using evidence of their lived experience, our study revealed that meeting the demands of studying at a foreign institution could be a meaningful source of motivation for the speakers to pursue their personal and academic growth. Strategies developed by participants were a means of overcoming stressful life events and of assisting them to strengthen their ability and stability. Notwithstanding that such phenomenological results are not generalizable to all international students, the authors hope that findings from this study will assist in identifying knowledge gaps and highlighting areas to improve in the promotion of equality in education, ideally creating a more positive and productive campus climate for all international students.

In contrast to much research cited above (Dooley, 2010; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Moon et al., 2020; Sawir et al., 2012), which identified language proficiency of L2 students as a major problem in their adjustment, this research explored the experience of being an L2 speaker, or being identified as an L2 speaker, as a threat to participants’ adaptation to Australian higher education. While the demand for English itself was overwhelming for some, the anticlimax experienced was partially the product of societal pressure for linguistic conformity. In this context, the power relations between L1 and L2 students were visible within interactions. Projecting a voice, being heard, and anticipating a response are basic to all communication per se; however, effective communications were not an easy accomplishment for participants. Their audible differences signified their status as an L2 speaker, so incidents of disrupted communication were not tolerated by L1 students and were even attributed to the participants, which accords with other research (Lippi-Green, 2012; Park, 2016). Such communication challenges appear to be one of the fundamental issues between L1 and L2 students. While communication barriers are left with L2 students to manage and minimize through enhancing language skills, the authors believe that real changes can be brought about by more active leadership from universities, starting with pedagogical strategies at the level of teaching and managing class interactions.

Results from this study contribute to scholarship concerning coping strategies in response to accent stereotyping and discrimination. Viewing participants’ lived experiences through a positive and strengths-based lens, developing resilience as a means of learning to survive was apparent in the data. In particular, interacting with L1 speakers in real-life situations led participants to seek out and develop

coping strategies. Some coping strategies under the themes, such as disguising (e.g., pretending to be a new student) and self-protection (e.g., avoiding topics related to their background), were developed to actively control communication, maintain communication, and try to go beyond fostering simple tolerance on the part of their interlocutors. On the one hand, participants were clearly not vulnerable, but resilient and competent in terms of these coping mechanisms because they tried to succeed in “imposing reception” in L1–L2 communication, where they were constructed as non-legitimate speakers of English (Bourdieu, 1992). On the other hand, it can be suggested that a heavy communicative burden was felt by participants, possibly because the dominant group may feel “perfectly empowered” to neglect their role in the communicative act (Lippi-Green, 2012). L2 students generally have a more uncertain command of English compared with L1 speakers; however, the point to recognize is that L1 varieties of English are not necessarily the most intelligible varieties for all English users (Jenkins, 2000). Other factors should be considered, such as unfamiliarity with local accents and speech styles, as indicated in this study. Communication barriers, therefore, can be regarded to some extent as a problem of L1 speakers because some may not feel the need to accommodate or adapt to others.

Several findings were consistent with existing literature that documents passive coping behaviors developed by L2 students. For example, participants had to deal with their language anxieties and acquired the fortitude to actively contribute to their learning and that of their peers. Therefore, worrying about anticipated communication breakdowns, about not being heard, and living with a fear of being negatively evaluated and experiencing stigmatization were clearly a painful reality. Consequently, passive coping strategies such as self-protection (e.g., not working with L1 speakers) were developed to help them continue their studies without being hurt. Houshmand et al. (2014) similarly found that some L2 Asian students regarded withdrawing from the learning sphere as the last option. In practice, East Asian students are often seen as silent, reticent, and embedded in their own learning styles that do not easily align with Westernized pedagogies (Moon et al., 2020). However, the findings indicate that a campus communication climate that is unproductive involves common stereotyping and misconceptions about East Asian students to some degree. Those who perceive their campus climate as unsafe and less accepting have been reported to limit their social boundaries and not participate in non-mandatory learning activities in classrooms (Jean-Francois, 2019).

While it is interesting to know at what point the accent-related challenges encountered by participants became less distressing, this is not the focus of this study. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, our study is the first report on how L2 students make sense of themselves as foreign-accented speakers in higher education settings. In EFL countries, where L2 accent is a commonplace, they did not feel marginalized. Conversely, when living in a situation where their accent is exceptional, their identity and accent became related issues. Interestingly, contrary to popular opinion (Derwing & Munro, 2009), participants developed an

interest in retaining their accent as a marker of their identity, emphasizing the value of being bilingual regardless of how they were seen or heard by the dominant group. By working through the challenges and having communication experiences in the dominant language context, they demonstrated a heightened understanding of intercultural communication along with knowledge in the management of social communicative consequences that may result from stereotypes about L2 speakers, in general. As participants believed, miscommunication is an inevitable phenomenon of any communication itself, whether their native language is English or other. Therefore, they eventually felt empowered to speak English with a foreign accent. Although the participants lived through these stages and emerged stronger, perhaps other students may be less resilient, less successful, and lost within the education system. These groups of students need more attention, support, and direction from the university community.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest that simply encouraging L2 students to be more active in classrooms, assimilate the host culture, and ask faculty members to be friendly and tolerant does not seem to be sufficient. Hence, we emphasize three implications for practice.

First, the role of faculty members is significant in creating the conditions that require hearing of and reception for L2 students (Kettle, 2013). A lack of shared responsibility in communication may be the core problem underpinning the lack of meaningful interactions between L1 and L2 students. Hence, more specific guidance for working with diverse students can be given; for example, sharing background information, being more receptive and responsive when miscommunication takes place (e.g., using simpler words, clarification, speaking slowly, avoiding colloquialism), and allowing L2 students more time to formulate their responses. The use of these localized English varieties along with particular knowledge limited to Australia may challenge the comprehension of those EFL students who did not have “authentic” exposure to different Englishes as well as culture.

Second, a “positive campus climate” for L2 students may mean that they enjoy freedom of speech, freedom from rebuke, and no fear of psychological harm within their learning environment. In that regard, intercultural communication training designed to raise social awareness for all members of the university community could be considered. Drawing on Vaccarino and Li’s (2018) intercultural communication training in higher education, the training program can incorporate three themes through verbal activities and discussions: “knowledge of self”, where participants reflect on their own culture and how their values can influence the way they communicate; “acknowledgement of cultural differences,” where participants acknowledge how cultural differences impact on the way they think, behave, and communicate; and “knowledge of other cultures”,

where participants appreciate and recognize individuals with values different to their own (p. 4). In addition, some empirical research findings around the difficulties that L2 students face can take place in the form of non-academic reports. These endeavors, in turn, should contribute to creating a more welcoming and accepting campus climate for all international students.

Third, university orientation programs can include a separate session for L2 students. Critical information is often shared during orientations but providing copious amounts of information may not be effective because L2 students may not remember it all. Introducing the challenges that L2 students experience and how they mitigate these challenges (e.g., introducing strategies found in this study, including how to improve language proficiency in real-life contexts) in foreign institutions can also be useful. Understanding the problems associated with intercultural communication, cultural differences, social inclusion, and stability can be half of the solution. If international students are not prepared—in a realistic manner—for what to anticipate and how to cope with new challenges, there may be a significant delay in their adjustment and integration to new learning environments. Employing current L2 international students or graduates as advisors or mentors could be an inspiring and empowering strategy.

REFERENCES

- Australian Government. (2017). *Export income to Australia from international education activity in 2016–2017*. <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/Research-Snapshots/Documents/Export%20Income%20FY2016-17.pdf>
- Australian Government. (2020). *International student enrolments in Australia 1994–2019*. <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Documents/INTERNATIONAL%20STUDENT%20DATA/2019/2019%20Time%20Series%20Graph.pdf>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information, 16*(6), 645–668. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847701600601>
- Bourdieu, P. (1992). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Derwing, T., & Munro, M. (2009). Putting accent in its place: Rethinking obstacles to communication. *Language Teaching, 42*(4), 476–490. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480800551X>
- Dooey, P. (2010). Students' perspectives of an EAP pathway program. *Journal of English for academic purposes, 9*(3), 184–197. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2010.02.013>
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. Guildford Press.
- Hellstén, M., & Prescott, A. (2004). Learning at university: The international student experience. *International Education Journal, 5*(3), 344–351. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ903859.pdf>

- Houshmand, S., Spanierman, L. B., & Tafarodi, R. W. (2014). Excluded and avoided: Racial microaggressions targeting Asian international students in Canada. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 20*(3), 377–388. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035404>
- Hunley, H. A. (2010). Students' functioning while studying abroad: The impact of psychological distress and loneliness. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 34*(4), 386–392. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.08.005>
- Jean-Francois, E. (2019). Exploring the perceptions of campus climate and integration strategies used by international students in a US university campus. *Studies in Higher Education, 44*(6), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1416461>
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford University Press.
- Kettle, M. (2013). *The right to a voice and the fight to be heard: The experience of being an ESL user in Australia*. Paper presented at the 13th International Pragmatics Conference (IPrA): Implicit discrimination in public discourse symposium, New Delhi, India.
- Khawaja, N. G., & Stallman, H. M. (2011). Understanding the coping strategies of international students: A qualitative approach. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 21*(2), 203–224. <https://doi.org/10.1375/ajgc.21.2.203>
- Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Miller, J. (2003). *Audible difference: ESL and social identity in schools*. Multilingual Matters.
- Moon, C. Y., Zhang, S., Larke, P. J., & James, M. C. (2020). We are not all the same: A qualitative analysis of the nuanced differences between Chinese and South Korean international graduate students' experiences in the United States. *Journal of International Students, 10*(1), 28–49. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i1.770>
- Park. (2016). *Social and educational challenges of international students caused by accented English in the Australian context: A sociolinguistic analysis of linguistic experience* [Master's thesis, Griffith University]. <https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/177>
- Patkowski, M. S. (1990). Age and accent in a second language: A reply to James Emil Flege. *Applied Linguistics, 11*(1), 73–89. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/11.1.73>
- Ryan, J., & Viète, R. (2009). Respectful interactions: Learning with international students in the English-speaking academy. *Teaching in Higher Education, 14*(3), 303–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510902898866>
- Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Forbes-Mewett, H., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2012). International student security and English language proficiency. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 16*(5), 434–454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311435418>

van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Vaccarino, F., & Li, M. (2018). Intercultural communication training to support internationalisation in higher education. *Intercultural Communication*, 2018(46), 1–14. <http://search.proquest.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/scholarly-journals/intercultural-communication-training-support/docview/2059074858/se-2?accountid=14543>

Dr EUNJAE PARK is a research fellow at Griffith University. Eunjae’s primary research interests include international higher education, sociolinguistics, and research methods. Email: eunjae.park@griffith.edu.au

Dr STEVEN HODGE is a senior lecturer and researcher at Griffith University. Steven’s research work focuses on curriculum design and development and teacher use of curriculum documents. Email: s.hodge@griffith.edu.au

Dr HELEN KLIEVE is an adjunct lecturer and researcher at Griffith University. Her current research is focused on the contribution of education in the context of social disadvantage and social justice. Email: h.klieve@griffith.edu.au
