
Rethinking Methodologies: Implications for Research on International Students

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Abstract

Research in international student success, satisfaction, and challenges seems still to be constructed around the colonial, imperial paradigm. Informed by deficit models of language, culture, and literacy teaching, such research portrays international students' challenges in terms of deficiency; discounts other languages, cultures, and literacy education; and reinstates the progressive and paternalistic role of the West, reifying its linguistic and cultural superiority. This essay interrupts the still dominant narrative that recreates the old binaries in two ways: (a) It frontloads the need to adopt strength-based approaches to counter dominant methodological paradigms from which much of knowledge about culturally and linguistically different/disadvantaged (CLDI) students is derived, and (b) based on my own ethnographic study on a South Asian immigrant population in Canada, it demonstrates that what the old paradigm views as deficits can and should be the very measures from which to appraise student success and satisfaction. Accordingly, the article's main objectives are twofold: (a) expose the weaknesses of the deficit models of language, culture, and competence and (b) stress the need to reshape international student studies in higher education as a field of inquiry by foregrounding appreciative models and methodologies.

The Context: Higher Education in North America

According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education, a total of 494,525 international students were enrolled in Canadian colleges in 2017, a 119% increase in enrollment from 2010 (Ditouras, 2018). The number of study permit holders increased from 122,700 in 2000 to 642,500 in 2019 (IRCC, 2020). As for the United States, even in the not-so-favorable political climate during the Trump presidency, over one million international students contributed more than \$36 billion to the US economy in 2017 (Ditouras, 2018). In Canada, international students have been viewed not only in economic terms, as cash cows—according to IRCC (2021), “International

students contribute over \$22.36B per year to the Canadian economy, greater than exports of auto parts, lumber or aircrafts” (para. 11)—but also in cultural terms to the extent that they bring long-term cultural benefits as brand ambassadors of Western education and governance systems. More importantly, however, in Canada, international students are seen more recently as the target population to meet the growing labor demand as the country faces two pressing problems: the dwindling population growth and the growth of the ageing population. As Crossman et al. write (2021), with reference to the Government of Canada’s International Education Strategy 2019–2024, Canada has the goal of doubling the number of international students by 2022. The Government of Canada recognizes international students as “excellent candidates for permanent residency” for multiple reasons: “they are relatively young, proficient in at least one official language, have Canadian educational qualifications, and can help address this country’s current and pending labour market needs, particularly for highly skilled workers” (cited in Crossman et al., 2021, para. 4). Given Canada’s unique needs, at face value, it seems entirely logical for the Canadian government to desire to make its higher education stand as a state apparatus to enculture and mold its future labor pool—which includes international students—to the mainstream socioeconomic fabric.

With the rise of the international student population, CLDI students’ studies within higher education as the field of inquiry (I use the term “field of inquiry” to convey a sense of operating within certain disciplinary practices and having a common language and concerns specific to it) has gained significant attention in the past two decades. Literature within writing program administration, higher education (Smith, 2016; Smith et al., 2019), and intercultural rhetoric/communication (Connor, 2011; Kramsch, 2002, 2009) have contributed to our understanding of the unique needs of international students as they navigate the different socio-cultural and academic environments. However, dominant literature on CLDI students within higher education has been tainted by narratives that lean on deficit models. The deficit models of language and culture cannot be dismissed wholesale for their contribution to our current understanding of CLDI students. It is important to recognize the value of previous studies and their historical specificity and relevance. However, deficit models have also established a research tradition that seems to have a lingering effect. In what follows, I start with an overview of the deficit models that have saturated much research on CLDI students and then suggest alternative research foci and methodologies that are responsive to today’s transnational reality.

Deficit Models

Research in international students’ experiences almost routinely reproduces narratives that are replete with challenges and barriers international students face during their transition into a new academic environment. As He and Huston (2018) point out, drawing on Wang et al., 2007, Wang, et al., 2012, & Ying, 2005, research in CLDI students’ transition to US higher education has typically adopted a problem-based model, in which the focus lies on the social, cultural, and psychological challenges these students face. Among Chinese students, for example, major challenges have been identified as language barriers, culture shock, and learning shock (Gu, 2011; Huang, 2012; Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2011; Zhang, 2016). It is in this context that more recent scholarship draws our attention to the harms the deficit models have caused and encourages us to rethink methodologies that fail to account for the multidimensionality and complexity underlying academic communication when it pertains to CLDI students (Gaulee et al., 2020)

Previous studies have their instructive value insofar as they remind us that we should not generalize CLDI students problems in blanket terms; that we need to pay more serious attention to

CLDI students' linguistic, cultural, and social differences, needs, and expectations; that we need to focus more on communicability (shared) rather than comprehensibility (group-specific) and intelligibility (one language system-specific, such as accent); and that we should prioritize rhetorical and meaning-making efforts over correctness and standards.

The fields of English as a second language, writing studies, and applied linguistics offer more complicated pictures of the challenges and barriers that are otherwise simplistically represented (Canagarajah, 2002; Cummins, 2007; Horner & Trimbur, 2002; Kubota, 2015; Leki, 1992; Matsuda, 2006). The Conference on College Composition and Communication Statement on Second Language Writing and Multilingual Writers (2020) "recognizes campuses around the world as fundamentally multilingual spaces, in which students and faculty bring to the acts of writing and communication a rich array of linguistic and cultural resources that enrich academic life and should be valued and supported" (para. 1). Advocating for and promoting multilingual spaces and social justice, this statement makes several recommendations concerning higher education in general and first-year writing, undergraduate, and graduate courses across the curriculum, writing centers, and intensive English programs specifically. This statement recognizes the process of acquiring academic literacies as a "complex, recursive, lifelong process" (para. 4) and offers guidelines on class size, writing assignment design, assessment, textual borrowing, teacher preparation, placement, credit, staffing, writing centers, and response to student writing. Rhetoric and composition scholars including Matsuda (2006), Canagarajah (2006), Young (2004), Young et al. (2011), and others have challenged English monolingualism and Standard English norms in the changing landscape of higher education and advocated for approaches that best serve the needs of multilingual learners.

The deficit view of language

English monolingualism and culturalism have contributed to a deficit view of language and culture, a view that relies on an idealized homogeneity of language and ignore the dynamism, contact, and interaction among languages and cultures. A deficit view ignores the reality that the so-called standards are unevenly distributed and unevenly benefit people across differences. It ignores that the rhetoric of standards conceals these realities by rationalizing the legitimacy of standards in terms of practicality, global connection, efficiency, avoidance of conflict, order, neutrality, apoliticality, and fairness (Inoue, 2015).

Cummins (2007) observes that Canadian multilingual classrooms actively reinscribe "monolingual instructional strategies" (p. 211). These strategies, Cummins explains, are guided by three interrelated assumptions: "(a) the target language (TL) should be used exclusively for instructional purposes without recourse to students' first language (L1); (b) translation between L1 and TL has no place in the language classroom; and (c) within immersion and bilingual programs, the two languages should be kept rigidly separate" (p. 221). Cummins terms these three misguided assumptions the "direct method" assumption, the "no translation" assumption, and the "two solitudes" assumption respectively (pp. 222–223). Neupane (2016) shows that several ESL, "bridge" and "link" English programs targeted to multilingual students in Canadian higher education have adopted English-only policies that adhere to the assumptions pointed out by Cummins.

Normative attitudes and essentialist originations to language influence the idea that languages are separate and that identities and boundaries are inseparable and dichotomous. Normative attitudes view the use of other languages in learning English as a barrier. Such attitudes influence a belief that CLDI students benefit when these boundaries are asserted and respected

rather than challenged—mixed, hybridized, and appropriated. From such a standpoint, Standard English should remain inviolate rather than be left to the users' discretion. Normative views do not tolerate negotiation and criticism; any deviation from norms is held as incompetence and a violation (Canagarajah, 2002).

In a recent teacher development webinar, Canagarajah (August 2021) posits that the field of writing is traditionally norm-governed. As such, teachers feel that their responsibility is “to give the norm to students and make them proficient in those norms” (07:31). Allowing students to be “experimental, creative, resistant” would mean “straying away from our duty” (07:35). The norm-confirming model ignores that “no text fully resembles the norm,” that “variation does not destroy the performance's conformity to the norm,” that “it is possible to accommodate diversity while respecting the norms” (11:40–60), and that “every text/act (re)shapes the norm” (15:06).

These deficit and discrete language attitudes and practices have impacted research on CLDI students' challenges, of which language challenges hold the continued priority. Research has indicated that many CLDI students face challenges related to English language competence that may include insufficient vocabulary and weak syntactical knowledge. However, as Sharma (2018) writes, “language is usually just the visible part of the metaphorical iceberg of multidimensional challenges ... in a new academic culture, instead of being a problem in itself” (p. 87). While Sharma research participants are international graduate students, the implication also holds true for international undergraduate students. Sharma observes that “addressing the difficulty with language may be necessary but usually does little to improve graduate-level writing” (p. 87). As Sharma cites one research participant saying, “It's not the English. It's being out of my home country! ... The way they teach here... I didn't know what was going on in class” (p. 87).

Sharma observes that “[T]he issue of language proficiency ... needs a thorough rethinking in the case of international students” (p. 87). Sharma illustrates this with an example Taiwanese student who indicates that her “biggest challenge is ...not the English language itself but the overall ecology of using that language when “speaking English in front of other students and teacher” (p. 87). Sharma advises that what appears to be anxiety at face value must not be used to “gauge students' language proficiency and/or cultural difference” (p. 87). From here, Sharma redirects our attention on language proficiency to other matters, including unfamiliarity with social and cultural contexts, genre and discourse expectations, identity and existential concerns arising from minority status, and biases and discriminatory treatment received from peers, instructors, and the system. Reducing the ecology of language (which includes more than language) to one language (English, in this case) is problematic. What is even more problematic is when the normative language is used as a measure to determine and evaluate students' overall cognitive and performative aspects.

Inoue (2021) draws our attention to the need to locate language as a site of power and privilege and how race is constructed and maintained through the English language. Inoue provocatively contends that Standard English represents “white language supremacy” (para. 1) and “White supremacy culture,” (para. 9) underlying which are “the habits of white language (HOWL)” (para. 1). HOWL function in various ways: in the form of correctness, appropriateness, clarity, order, consistency, neutral, objective and apolitical stance, control. As Inoue writes,

Rigor, order, clarity, and consistency are all valued highly and tightly prescribed, often using a dominant standardized English language that comes from a White, middle- to upper-class group of people. Thinking, rationality, and knowledge are understood as apolitical, unraced, and can be objectively displayed. Words, ideas, and language itself are

disembodied, or extracted, from the people and their material and emotional contexts from which the language was created or exists. (para. 16)

The discussion in this section around the deficit view of language exposes its weaknesses and the problems associated with teaching and research that relies on a normative view of language.

The deficit view of culture

Often, cultural issues in connection to CLDI students get told in binary narratives. One such binary narrative is that of individualism versus collectivism, which informs our view, for example, of these students' pronouns choices and citation habits. Another binary narrative is low-context versus high-context cultures, which defines how we view these students' writing "styles." In "Fostering International Student Success in Higher Education," Shapiro et al. (2014) bring this binarization to light by situating their discussion within the US academic culture. These writers imply that we need to pay attention to cultural peculiarities and particularities to better understand CLDI students' writing styles, something in common with Kaplan's historical and much contested "Cultural Thought Patterns" hypothesis. Kaplan's (1966) "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," a contrastive study of paragraph development in English by approximately six hundred students from different cultural backgrounds, questioned the limitation of the recognition "of the existence of cultural variation ... to level of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure" (p. 12). However, Kaplan's finding that Anglo-European expository writing follows a linear path, Semitic languages feature parallel structures, Oriental writing is characterized by indirectness, and Romance and Russian languages develop paragraphs in digression (p. 10) has been much criticized for its essentializing consequences and deterministic stance.

Also, a reduction of the complex and layered issue of academic performance to these peculiarities limits our understanding of the whole ecology of writing and student success. My experience as an instructor for a decade in Western higher education suggests that many writing and communication-related problems that we ordinarily tend to assign to CLDI students are also true for the students born and educated in US and Canada. This makes for an important reminder that academic writing is no one's mother language or mother culture.

It is in this connection that the eye-opening classic essay by David Bartholomae (1986), "Inventing the University," is instructive. In this essay, Bartholomae discusses the longstanding problems writing instructors and their struggling students face. Although written in the context of Basic Writing courses designed specifically for students of color, and working-class backgrounds, and minorities, whose level of English is 'basic', Bartholomae's observations are widely useful in the context of higher education. Here I quote at length the opening paragraph of "Inventing the University":

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community, since it is in the nature of a liberal arts education that a student, after the first year or two, must learn to try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes—to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and an experimental psychologist the next, to work

within fields where the rules governing the presentation of examples or the development of an argument are both distinct and, even to a professional, mysterious. (p. 4)

This quote suggests that any writer who attempts academic communication goes through the complex process of acculturation in the academic ways and habits; that is, to speak like academics, to write like academics, and to learn to “know, select, evaluate, report, conclude, argue” within in the language of a discourse community as one of the members. These are complex processes, rather than just a matter of a language problem in isolation.

Some international education studies suggest that special attention must be paid to intellectual ownership, plagiarism, individual voice, and assertiveness (Shapiro et al., 2014). The logic behind this suggestion is that international students such as those from South Asia studying at the undergraduate level in US and Canadian colleges may not have sufficient understanding of intellectual ownership and plagiarism, largely because they have no experience doing writing projects that required research. Plagiarism by Chinese and South Asian students is explained in deficit and essentializing terms. These students commit plagiarism, as the logic goes, because being a collectivist society, they do not have the tradition of intellectual property. Such a logic not only reduces the “complexity of the issue surrounding plagiarism” but also reflects “an impoverished view” of the cultures associated with the students (Bloch, 2008, p. 259). The debate of plagiarism needs some historicizing and rethinking by paying attention to how the idea of property ownership was institutionalized in the West and supported by early expressions of individualism and the definition of freedom as the inalienable right to property (e.g., Locke) and how these ideas were translated into a mode of capitalism. Within the West, the traditional conceptualization of intellectual property as a right and the romantic ideal behind authorship has already been questioned by shifting and new textual realities, especially with the advent of the Internet (intertextuality, hyper textuality, remixing, and so on) and collaborative work ethos, among other factors. Most importantly, ownership, plagiarism, individual voice, and assertiveness are not problems exclusive to international students. Voice and assertiveness are complex skills that even experienced writers sometimes struggle with. These are also attitudes and dispositions that could rightly be explained in terms of cultural differences. In any case, as teachers and scholars we need to be aware of the complexity and sensitivity involving communication and composition, especially for culturally and linguistically disadvantaged international students. We need to be careful not to reify a culture and text, for that matter, given their dynamism.

Despite the lapses, Shapiro et al.’s (2014) discussion of culture leaves us with some excellent toolkits and activities: icebreakers and structured group work activities, taking time to clarify course expectations from the beginning, and avoiding cultural assumptions or unexplained pop culture references. The last of these brings me so close to home! My experience as an international student in the United States and Canada is that pop cultural references isolated me from the process of “belonging” and made me an outsider.

Integrating others’ and his own research, Smith (2016) summarizes best-practice recommendations, which include the need to train instructors on issues of intercultural competence, address international students’ “social adaption” and “integration” challenges (p. 63), offer “differentiated instruction” to facilitate students’ “varied learning readiness, personal interests, and culturally-framed ways of knowing,” and adopt strengths-based approaches “to maximize each learner’s experience by adjusting instructional tasks by building on student strengths” (cited in Smith, p. 255). In support of Smith’s study that instructors and student advisors lack cultural knowledge of the students they serve is a study by Zhang (2015), in which the researcher shows that academic advisors felt ill-prepared to work with international students:

“Advisors found it easy to identify challenges for international students (such as low English proficiency) as well as cultural differences (most notably, gender role differences) but found it difficult to integrate international students’ expectations, cultural understandings, and negotiation styles into their advising work” (cited in Zenner & Squire, 2020, pp. 340–341). In this study, advisors also expressed their lack of knowledge of educational systems in other countries. Although they indicated a desire to learn about international students, they indicated having made no plans and found no resources to do so.

The deficit view of competence

It takes going back to the history of colonization and racism to fully realize that the naturalized view of dominant language and culture and what counts as competence is a construct that is legitimized largely in terms of the global market need for its neutrality appeal. I will not be going in that direction because it is neither relevant nor possible to reproduce that knowledge in this article. Suffice it to say that it is time that higher education redefines competence, allows for academic discourse to be flexible with the various resources that language users bring to their act of communication, and prioritizes meaning making across linguistic and cultural differences over the deficit models of intelligibility and comprehensibility. As indicated earlier, the dominant conception of language competence relies on the ideology of English monolingualism, where only efforts to imitate or approximate the idealized language are rewarded, and any deviation is punished. It ignores that “Multilinguals do not have separate competences for separately labelled languages (as it is assumed by traditional linguistics), but an integrated competence that is different in kind (not just degree) from monolingual competence” (Canagarajah & Wurr, 2011, p. 6).

Not only does the English language competence, which is to say competence in Standard English as we saw via Inoue, become a site to reinforce a particular version, view, and ideology of language, but it also validates competence as a measure of quality control, management, and efficiency. Consequently, a narrow view of competence fails to account for other important contributing factors to student performance.

There is rich and growing literature in languaging and language pluralism, including the translingual approach to language difference (Horner et al., 2011), and translanguaging pedagogies (García et al., 2017; García & Wei, 2014). These studies collectively argue for language rights and language diversity and seek equity and inclusion by allowing and encouraging students to use their linguistic, cultural, semiotic, and ecological resources. It seems, however, that research in higher education focusing on CLDI student success is not paying adequate attention to these concerns. Consequently, it seems to be complicitous with an idealized version of one language and culture. It is important that researchers in the cognate field be educated in recent discussions in critical socio-applied linguistics and rhetoric and composition that challenge monolingual models, making us more ethical in our ways, sensitizing us on the issues of language and race, power, politics, and privilege, and pushing us to rethink higher education beyond the neoliberal assignment of measuring everything in the scale of management and bureaucracy.

Inadequate Methodologies: Unthinking Methodology

Strength-based models

Several studies that I came across in international students’ research reflect the recognized methods of conducting research and preparing reports specific to the discipline, which involved

surveys, interviews, and a combination of quantitatively and qualitative research methods. However, very few represented ethnographic “thick” descriptions. Researchers seemed to be driven by the need to identify as many possible reasons as there are leading to student dissatisfaction and failure rather than a deep analysis of an identified problem. In other words, coverage tends to get priority over detailed analysis. As a result, readers expecting deeper analysis will be frustrated to see the research filled with data and tabulation and a bewildering range of recommendations.

Based on their observation that few studies have adopted strength-based perspectives, He and Huston (2018) recommend foregrounding appreciative approaches to explore and encourage the ways international students leverage their backgrounds to achieve success. They point out that while international students maintain their own cultural identity, they also desire and strive to participate in interactions with others (i.e., integration). However, multiple researchers have reported that students face stress and challenges in this process (Wang et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012; Ying, 2005). He and Huston’s (2018) Appreciative Education (AE) framework challenges problem-focused thinking and frontloads the acculturation process of international students from China. The AE framework has six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don’t Settle. The definitions and processes of each phase are as follows:

The Disarm phase invites participants to reflect on their assumptions and strive to build trusting and safe environments for interaction. Positive and open-ended questions are used in the Discover phase to explore participants’ strengths through past successes. Future aspirations are shared during the Dream phase to establish common visions and personal goals. During the Design phase, an action plan is constructed to reflect both one’s strengths and aspirations. The action plan is carried out during the Deliver phase through leveraging one’s internal and external strengths. Finally, in the Don’t Settle phase, participants are challenged to uncover new strengths and aspirations and continue to design action plans for future success. (p. 90)

Although the quote is self-sufficient, a few positive and appreciative words deserve iteration: “trusting and safe environments for interaction”, “positive and open-ended questions to explore participant’s strengths”, “new strengths and aspirations”. If adopted properly, AE framework can offer an excellent alternative to deficit models and methodologies.

Rethinking the unidirectional mode of intercultural competence and research methods

Appreciative research methodologies can provide alternative narratives as a starting point to intervene in the way intercultural competence is discussed. While intercultural competence is a desired goal for educators and advisors alike, the end goal of intercultural competence does not seem so much to alter the vector of inequality or change linguistic and cultural monoliths and inherent cultural superiority as to often make multilingual and multicultural international students change themselves further so they can fit in and belong. This, one can argue, is an assimilation model in a guise. As editors of *Cultural Competency Training in a Global Society* Dana and Allen (2008) write, “the outcomes of acculturation determine the goodness-of-fit of these new populations with majority populations and either foster or impair opportunities for creating productive and satisfying lives” (p. vi). Such a unidirectional approach makes Donahue (2009) stress, in the context of internationalization of higher education, that as educators and scholars we need to disrupt the colonial mentality by challenging the export/import model of education and replacing it with a dialogic, interactional, cross-cultural model, which allows us to go beyond the

“us–them” dichotomy (p. 214). I agree with Donahue that the Global North must “think about where our work fits in the world rather than where the world’s work fits into ours” (p. 214).

Even the “well-intentioned [works] that take into account students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds” while making us “sensitive to students’ struggles with language and writing,” writes Zamel (1997), might “lead to a deterministic stance and deficit orientation as to what students can accomplish in English and what their writing instruction should be” (p. 341). Zamel is concerned that the approach to “examine one language in comparison with another reinforces the idea that each is separate from, even in opposition to, the other and keeps educators from understanding the complex ways in which the two intersect, mingle with, and give shape to one another” (p. 341). A view that promotes seeing students as “bound by their culture may be trapped by their own cultural tendency to reduce, categorize, and generalize” (p. 342). Zamel challenges essentializing and dichotomizing assumptions that have shaped a view that international students’ communicative difficulties come from their cultural ways, such as the idea that Japanese thinking places value on “subtlety” and “indirection” (Fox, 1994 cited in Zamel p. 342). Zamel is also concerned about the problematic view that ESL students “are resistant to critical thinking, a questioning stance, and a degree of skepticism” (p. 342). Such a view, as Zamel further explains, renders ESL students as “less capable of reevaluating beliefs and values, rethinking issues, and raising intelligent questions than their English-as-L1 counterparts are” (p. 342). Unfortunately, several decades after the publication of Said’s *Orientalism* and the resonating of that voice by a host of teachers and scholars, we continue to see literature that maintains the deficit, deterministic view of language and culture, which sees students’ home language as limiting and problematic.

Contrary to the limiting view of international students, researchers (Leki, 1995; Lu, 1987; Rose, 1984; Soliday, 1994; Villanueva, 1993) have long suggested that ESL students are not less critical thinkers, their languages and cultures are not limiting, and their languages, cultures, and identities are not fixed; rather, they are dynamic and adaptable. And contrary to the interference model, which assumes that one’s home language (L1) is a barrier, research suggests that L1 is not necessarily a barrier to a successful leaning of L2. Zamel’s research excerpt below, in which she is discussing a case of Chinese student, illustrates this point:

Students acknowledge the generative possibilities of writing in English, but they also note the connection between a literacy background in one language and the acquisition of another. In one account, a graduate student from China recalls the challenges she faced in her courses and the adjustments she had to make in her new culture, wishing at times that English were her L1. But as she addresses this issue, she recognizes the facilitative influence that writing in Chinese has had on her writing in English. (p. 348)

In other words, challenges are not equivalent to failure. It is through challenges that learners develop coping mechanisms and creative strategies to exercise their agency and identity. I reproduce what the Chinese student says at length from Zamel’s essay because of its relevance to my argument in this essay:

It was precisely my Chinese that had enabled me to write in English as I was doing. ... My pen was still tied because I did not have many words and ways of expressing in my English repertoire, yet I possessed one thing that all writers needed to write well, the ability to think, deeply, from all sides. In recollection, I could see how my Chinese had facilitated my acquisition of another language.... What I had read and written in Chinese had not been wasted, had certainly not become interference. They flew back to me as a sense, an ambiance of words, sentences, minds. (Zamel, p. 348)

These examples suggest that we need to be reflective of the assumptions that influence our research. Researchers need to be aware that their own interests are “interested” and that their own biases, educational background, and professional training determine what they research and what questions and methodology they adopt. It is in this context that Gaulee et al.’s (2020) invitation to “seek to identify the fault lines and potentially disrupt established and saturated narratives, insufficient questions, and outdated perspectives that have dominated discourses and research agenda about international students’ education” sounds paramount (p. 5). They write further,

[T]here is a need for scholars themselves to hit the reset button on some of the dominant narratives about international education. For instance, the majority of scholars working with or even engaged in research on international students continue to focus on a roster of popular topics, often conducting innovative research but noticing the same old problems such as language proficiency, cultural difference, and lack of intellectual honesty among international students as the most significant in their research findings—instead of exploring contexts, connections, or complexities behind these appearances. Most academic scholars and staff members continue to complacently embrace and reinforce old narratives, whether it is out of self-interest inherent in the model of their professional work, lack of critical thinking due to the acceptance of dominant narratives, inability to penetrate researched/informed perspectives. (p. 7)

Rethinking diversity

Zhang et al. (2016) write, “Diversity on campus continues to be managed in roughly the same way as in business organizations” (p. 366). They observe that student diversity in the higher education context is still mainly “conceptualized in terms [of] ... student demographics (*structural diversity* such as race and gender), facilitating local–international student interaction (*interactional diversity*), or incorporating diverse perspectives and cultures into curricula (*curricular diversity*; Lee, 2012, p. 201). Suggesting a shift “beyond affirmative educational efforts to building competencies of CLDI students,” these writers propose, via Lee (2012, p. 201) that there needs to be diversity advocacy to promote “the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with differences in a purposeful manner so as to increase one’s diversity-related competencies” (p. 372).

Additionally, Zhang et al. identify that international students’ lack of language proficiency and cultural knowledge have been paid more than the attention they deserve—for various reasons, including the need higher education feels to help culturally and linguistically diverse international student achieve academic success. They observe further that compared to *social differences* (i.e., race, gender, disability, geographical area, etc.) and *cultural differences* (values, norms, assumptions, attitudes, and custom), scholarly differences have been underappreciated. From this, Zhang et al. suggest that we need to actively advocate diversity, focusing on “scholarly differences” associated with language proficiency, cultural knowledge, academic norms, and learning styles.

Resonating with an appreciative model discussed earlier, Zhang et al. suggest that higher education needs to focus more on the transformative approach. They explain this point with an example of curricular internationalization. For example, within curricular internationalization, the *economic rationalist approach* (with a focus on efficiency, standards, and commoditization) and the *integrative approach* (which integrates intercultural competence and nondominant cultures) have been privileged over the *transformative approach*. What is required to make curricular design reflect student diversity is foregrounding precisely this transformative approach. As Zhang et al.

emphasize, “the transformative approach welcomes multiple perspective and adopts a critical stance toward the dominant and nondominant cultures” (p. 371). It seems reasonable to say that higher education and international student research needs to listen to scholars whose work closely and genuinely aligns with student diversity instead of the managerial and administrative model of diversity.

My Research

In this section I present a small but relevant part of my research, a three-year community-based study among a South Asian student population in Canadian graduate and undergraduate programs with intensive, research, and communicative components. Ethics review-approved, this research combined group discussions, interviews, case studies, and participant observation as it explored the content and character of the featured migrants’ resistance, adaptation, and even appropriation of dominant practices of meaning making in academic and social spaces. Participants’ experiences consist of difficulties in navigating unfamiliar academic and social expectations; the lack of appropriate support mechanisms; and the presence of direct and indirect forms of racism. Findings confirmed that CLDI students’ challenges are real. However, they indicate that these challenges should not be mistaken as having to do with deficit models, which view language, culture, and literacy differences as barriers.

Language, culture, and identity

The interrelatedness between language and identity, language and culture, and language and thought was one of the key themes that emerged from my research. Participants spoke with noticeable discomposure and emotional intensity of the role of the English language in rendering them as distinct (in a deficit sense) from the speakers of “the language of wider communication” (Smitherman, 2017).

Participants thus spoke of how the English language has caused identity crisis and even the loss of identity:

I am very sorry that I lose my identity. So yeah, what I was there and what I became, what I transferred to be here, is my identity. So I went through identity crisis for long. (Bigyan)

I enjoyed high prestigious job and high prestige at the society ... Here we don’t have this because we have to start from the bottom or from the ground level or root level. I couldn’t find any job market over here and in the job market it is very hard for me to become competent as like the native speaker of the English, so I left it and I chose the new career. (Dilip)

In our back home English language was as a luxury. It was kind of power. When we spoke English, it was recognized as a good person, a kind of personality ... something like that ... In my back home I was (space filler) almost like a hero. (Dibesh)

In all these excerpts, not “becoming competent as like the native speaker,” or what Holliday (2006) might call the “native speakerism” effect, is identified as the main source of identity crisis. When Bigyan says, “I went through identity crisis for a long time,” hidden beneath this expression is a positive note, as indicated by the past verb “went,” meaning that the crisis is not permanent, that people learn to get accustomed to it, or forge new ways to remake themselves. Dibesh notes

that English, which conferred him “heroism” and “power” back in Nepal, no longer holds the same promise of power and privilege.

From these participants’ narratives, one could reaffirm the values of language—that the question of language is not about language. It is about more than language, even something else.

A case for negotiation and resistance

While some participants simply complained about what they identify as the ongoing hegemony of English, others took a resolute stance against approximating a specific accent as the target goal: “No, I never focus on tone and accent because it’s just an imitation. It does not make your language natural at all. So, if you don’t speak your language naturally there is a psychological [consequence]” (Kranti, group discussion).

“Imitation” of an ideal speaker and ideal accent and affectation constitute for this speaker the loss of a “natural” quality unique to the speaker or their distinct identity. It is to accept homogeneity as desirable.

Dibesh, another participant, is disconcerted that the fluency in a given language has been the measuring rod of immigrants’ overall strengths and abilities: “While speaking with people, people perceive us through our language; they will not explore our knowledge, our attitude, anything else but *how* we speak with them. That matters” (my emphasis). Dibesh is emotional about changes:

I perceive myself as an inferior person due to language barrier and people also (gets emotional here) *perceive us as if they are people without knowledge*. (anger) We come here for the sake of money? That’s not the reality (anger) *We came not only for the money*. We came here for the knowledge, to see the technological advancement, how people survive, how people live, how people of their so-called developed country are experiencing their life.

In the process, Dibesh not only challenges the reductive, unreliable, and biased methods of assessing people’s worth, but also re-evaluates the strong version of Sapir/Whorf hypothesis; language *determines* thought:

And the language not only (that is, does not) determines our thought, I think. We have different vision, we have different ideas . . . We speak English as a second language, also have similar or more knowledge than they do. So in my personal opinion, the attitude, the perception they determine on the basis of short communication is biased. They have to change their attitude of evaluating people on the basis of ten-second interview or three-second resume scanning. (group discussion)

Evaluating abilities based on what transpires from a brief encounter is particularly misleading, even dangerous, especially when the dominant language provides the norm for native-like fluency and correct usage, something scholars who look into the nexus of language, literacy, culture, racism, modernity, and colonialism have been pondering (Alim et al., 2016; Mignolo, 2011; Rosa & Flores, 2017). In his own way, Dibesh essentially reminds us of the division of humanity, cognitivity, and rationality along the lines of ethnicity, gender, geography, language, and culture and its wide-ranging consequences.

Implications

International student research in higher education seems still to be guided by the assumption that we need to help international students acquire competencies in the dominant language, culture and disposition, which eventually supports colonial, racial, and hegemonic logics. In effect, such research not only runs the risk of essentializing cultures in terms of students' "observed" and "identified" needs and differences but also privileges the English language and the idea of Western progress as unquestionable givens.

The identified needs for international students, ranging from socio-cultural to self-actualization needs and represented as unquestionable facts, the only passport to social mobility, and the only pathway to success, fall within overgeneralized and even romanticized narratives. Such narratives are unwittingly complicitous with what Said (1978) recognized, in his *Orientalism*, as an orientalist discourse. Said contends that orientalism is not only an imaginary, but also the material from and with which the West constructs the rest: "Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines" (p. 4).

Said's point that the kinds of scholarship we produce, support, and reproduce; the kinds of representation and generalization we make about others, in this case CLDI students; the values we assert and impose; and the priorities we set for our students has had and is going to have implications. An evaluation of student success now and in the future in terms of their ability to approximate a target language and culture has a history and complicity in the form of culturalism. The stereotypical representation of international students as necessarily struggling and in need of additional support has its social, psychological, and moral consequences for the population. International students' studies need to start self-questioning their usefulness and focus on alternative methodologies on ways that we can "identify a range of new topics, as well as new methods, theories, and perspectives" and "expose the pitfalls of deficit framing" (Gaulee et al., 2020, p. 7). To that end, frontloading strength-based models and exploring negotiation, resistance, and appropriation could be one small step.

Author Bio

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