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## *Navigating a Third Space to Support International Students in the U.S.*

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## Abstract

The present article explores the experiences of two international graduate students who studied in the United States and how they dealt with the challenges of living in a new country. The researcher was inspired by Bhabha's (1994) third space theory and aimed to investigate how these students tried to create a space for themselves in the classroom to overcome cultural differences. The data has been collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Gee's (2011) discourse analysis method. The study concluded that providing international students with a designated space in the classroom to address their cultural challenges could greatly benefit them, and teachers can actively facilitate this space.

*Keywords:* Bhabha's third space, international graduate students, cultural differences, teacher instruction

## Navigating a Third Space to Support International Students in the U.S.

This paper presents the experiences of two international graduate students who were interviewed in-depth to explore how having a "third space" can help learners cope with the challenges they face in a new country, especially the United States. The study is based on Bhabha's (1994) theory of third space, which suggests that learners can create their role in a new learning environment by using a third space. The paper also draws on Bakhtin's (1981) "voicing" theory to propose solutions to the challenges faced by international students. One of Gee's (2011) discourse analysis tools was used to analyze the data. The paper suggests that international students need a third space to help them use their life experiences, which can assist them in overcoming cultural struggles in a new environment.

### My Positionality and Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of the present case study was to shed light on the experiences of international graduate students in a classroom setting, specifically how they navigate between two different cultures and find their place within them. As an international student, I often face the challenge of adapting to a new cultural context where I am unable to use my native language. English is our second language. I use it both at work and in class. Although I am comfortable using English, I often feel excluded and marginalized because I cannot use my language. When I talk to other international students, I find that we share a common struggle of adjusting to life in a new country for many reasons. These reasons include language barriers, feeling lonely in a new environment, missing our home country, missing the food of our native country, economic struggles, and managing money, among others.

When I decided to write this paper, I used my own experiences as an international student and tried to connect those with other international students. To highlight more on this, I always felt a lack of belongingness here. I found myself alone sometimes. It also seemed to me that none can understand my emptiness due to a big cultural transition while living in a new country. Therefore, I intentionally chose two of my graduate peers who are also from international backgrounds. One of them was from Bangladesh and one was from China. They are pursuing their PhD at a Midwest university and they participated in my research work willingly when they heard my intention to write about our struggles in academia.

## **Relevant Literature and Rationale of the Study**

### ***Binaries in Third Space Theory***

A third space theory is a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory of identity where a learner collides with two cultures (Bhabha, 1994) and then reaches a third space where he/she negotiates meaning at recognizable spaces and therefore creates his own space to overcome those cultural struggles. The Third Space is a place where people can transform themselves without being restricted to any particular set of dominant values and traditions. It is a productive space where individuals or groups are free to create their own identities by drawing on elements of different discourses. These elements can be appropriated, translated, historicized, and reinterpreted in a new way. The Third Space recognizes how people resist dominant ideologies' hegemonic narratives by negotiating and transforming them. The study was significant to me to explore how third space theory might work for international students and how this concept could be used to give our students voices in an educational context.

To discuss the existing literature, I would like to draw attention to the existing concept of third space as defined by Soja (1998). Soja's third space theory was based on binary concepts in which the individual's discourse is seen as a discursive practice of this theory and which demanded a change to use another term to understand an individual's fund of knowledge. On the other hand, Bhabha's (1994) third space theory gave a new dimension to understanding each individual in a space where they can be perceived from an 'in-between' perspective (Moje et al., 2004). Gutierrez et al.'s (1999) proposed the same kind of perspective on the third space theory where they emphasized exploring students' discourses as resources in the educational contexts.

In my paper, I aim to examine the impact of our instructors' instructions, specifically their particular discourses, on marginalized learners. I will explore how these instructional approaches can create a third space in a graduate classroom. I will consider classroom teachers as agents in a new cultural setting. Additionally, I aim to voice the experiences of marginalized learners in a U.S. educational context to examine the existing school practices more broadly.

### ***Learners' Experience and Third Space***

Moll (1990) argues that classrooms are transformed into more advanced contexts for teaching and learning if we create a social network that connects them to outside resources and mobilizes learners' funds of knowledge. I am particularly interested in exploring how we can utilize the social and historical experiences of our international learners, inherited from their own cultures, as funds of knowledge to identify their strengths. This paper could be significant for future research in understanding how to leverage the struggles of minoritized learners in the classroom counting them as assets. Humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 2000) has inspired me to recognize and utilize our learners' cultural resources to help them navigate their third space and overcome the limitations imposed on minority students due to racial discrimination.

### ***International Students' Struggle and U.S. Academia***

The Third Space Theory by Bhabha has gained importance in multicultural educational settings in recent years. This theory seeks to understand the complexities that arise from cultural diversity, where learners from different backgrounds must establish their identities in a given situation (Sjödin,

2022; Tatham-Fashanu, 2021). The researchers conducted studies to demonstrate the positive impact of the third space concept on children aged 4-12 in educational settings. However, there has been limited research on how this theory can help identify the struggles of graduate students.

According to Campbell (2015), there were 819,644 international students enrolled in U.S. higher education in 2013, a 40% increase within a decade. Studies showed that international students make considerable sacrifices in leaving their homes, families, and sources of social and financial support in their home countries while staying in the U.S. and undergoing language and cultural adjustments, and visa concerns. Also, they often must struggle to supplement their income while in the U.S.; and they must work to integrate with their American counterparts socially and academically (Bowman, 2012). In another study, research found that international students face several challenges when coming to the U.S. for their post-secondary education e.g. challenges of acculturation, low English language competency, difficulties with social and academic integration, and even problems with discrimination (Jung & Hecht, 2008). In a recent study on third space, Benzie (2015) demonstrated how using the concept of third space theory can assist postgraduate students in pathway programs in creating their own identities.

I found limited or no research on how classroom instructions, such as a teacher's speech, can create a "third space" to aid international students in coping with their difficulties while studying in the United States. Therefore, my study aims to investigate how navigating a third space can offer support to international students at a Midwest university.

## **Theoretical Framework**

My study is informed by two main theories: Voicing (Bakhtin, 1981) and third space theory (Bhabha, 1994).

### ***Voicing (Bakhtin, 1981)***

I have been exploring how the knowledge gained from the life experiences of marginalized students can help in creating a better learning environment. To do this, I am using Bakhtin's (1981) concept of voicing, which means narrators represent their positions and those of others by analyzing their discourses in dialogues. Bakhtin believes that meaning is created through dialogues. My objective is to analyze how an individual student shares their voice in dialogues, inspired by Bakhtin's work on voicing, and to assess the learner's self-assessed positionality in a culturally shifted classroom.

To elaborate on Bakhtin's concept of voicing, he refers to the term heteroglossia as an internal stratification of language. This means that speaking in certain voices indicates the person's social positioning. I will use this idea to explore how two graduate students feel about their positionality in a new cultural context. Bakhtin also believes that when narrators put words in voices through a character's mouth, it signals an index or cue associated with certain voices, thereby initiating a social positioning. In this way, social positions are represented through voicing in a given context. Though I am not analyzing the positions in detail I am intrigued to see how to help these students who struggle with positionality by reaching a third space or if it is even possible to.

To sum up, I tried to understand how struggling learners can develop their position and use their life experiences as resources in an educational context where they face tensions created by their marginalized ethnic or linguistic background or opposite cultural conflicts. It was my purpose to

know about these students' perceptions about how they would feel if they were given a space in the classroom with the help of the instructors. In that case, my paper is a trial to understand if the third space theory can be used as a concept of collaboration between two different cultures to reduce existing cultural gaps. According to this theory, marginalized individuals create their own liberated space in the third space. This theory might help in understanding the cultural struggles students face while living in a new country. To dig deeper, my paper will examine the existing classroom practices that learners use to navigate in the third space and grow their literacy skills.

### **Research Questions**

My research is guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways do international graduate students connect their own life experiences with new cultural resources at a third space?
2. What types of classroom instruction helps them to negotiate between two cultures in a third space?

### **Methodology**

#### **Data Collection**

As part of the research, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with two international graduate students in a natural setting. The participants were selected based on their international student background. One of the participants is a Bangladeshi graduate student pursuing a PhD and the other is a Chinese student pursuing an M.A. Both participants were my peers. I obtained their consent before they participated in the study. At first, I discussed my research intentions with them. Later, I sent them messages through emails. They agreed to my proposal of participation in this study. I have used pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded for transcription purposes. The Zoom meetings lasted between 15 and 25 minutes and were conducted in English. Excerpts from the transcription are included in this study.

#### **Participant Consent**

The participants were informed about the research design and its purpose. They gave word of mouth as evidence of an agreement to participate in the study. I also sent an email to each of them where they were notified about the consent and aims of the study.

### **Results**

From the interview data, it was found that international graduate students usually are struggling in the U.S. for several reasons. The first struggle they encounter is cultural differences. Data showed that they are very interested in getting a space in the new classroom or they want to use that classroom space to connect with a new culture. I assumed this space could be used as a third space to help these learners. To analyze the interview data I used interview responses and responses to questionnaires. Interview transcription revealed the following findings.

***Students Confront with Cultural Struggles and Suggested for a Space***

It was found from both interview transcripts that graduate students who are from international backgrounds usually face struggles in a new environment. When asked about what are the main struggles they encounter one of them stated that their main struggle is not language but a new culture. As Shuva (Pseudonym) reported:

**Table 1**

*Interview Transcript for Shuva (Graduate Student in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction)*

- 1 “I cannot imagine! that I am here ALONE,
- 2 it is not LANGUAGE,
- 3 you know,
- 4 it is something horrible about a new CULTURE!
- 5 I am studying here alone
- 6 and I am scared
- 7 at first to think how can I survive here
- 8 in a completely new culture.”

Xin (Pseudonym), a Chinese international student, also mentioned that she is always in a panic state to adjust to a new environment. She believed that she is marginalized not for language but for many other reasons like having a non-immigrant status, having low income and mostly having no friends from her own culture in the classroom. In an informal interview she reported:

*"I sometimes feel the need for a space where I can connect with someone from a different culture while using my own culture. I am not sure if this is what is referred to as a "third space", but I strongly feel the need for it. I desire to feel free in this space. Some faculties have been working hard to provide such a space, and I appreciate their efforts. However, I hope that every faculty can offer this kind of support to international students like me."*

***Instructors Play Important Roles in Negotiating with New Cultures***

During my conversation with a participant, I inquired about her experience using classroom spaces to engage with two different cultures. She emphasized the importance of international students feeling respected in a graduate class. The following excerpt highlights her thoughts on the negotiation between two cultures and how a classroom can serve as a "third space" where two cultures can interact.

**Table 2**

*Interview Transcript Shuva (Graduate Student in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction)*

- 1 ...Oh...you cannot imagine... how HAPPY I was
- 2 coz he was such a great MENTOR
- 3 he always RESPECTS me...I mean.. Umm... Us...
- 4 respect is must, you know/
- 5 I was able to understand lesson when feel that
- 6 that means he respects me in class...
- 7 I mean MOTIVATION matters.. Coz you know we are STRUGGLING..mean

- 8 totally new environment
- 9 and he give you a space
- 10 I need it...um..I really need it

Interviewer: Could you please explain how to use this space thing?

- 11 Yes, of course...
- 12 I feel freedom
- 13 I think everyone should be sould be you know...
- 14 Like him
- 15 His instructions are something like
- 16 Giving you a space for you
- 17 I feel very confident there...
- 18 I need this space for myself
- 19 You know

The above excerpt explores how an international student feels about the instructor's language choice, attitude towards her, and a deep sense of belongingness to reduce the gaps between two different cultures.

Another participant, Xin, mentioned during the interview:

*"I was in a class where the professor was talking about Chinese culture. There were several Chinese students in the class, including me, and the teacher invited us on stage for a short speech. Because many people don't know Chinese culture and have never known it. So this class also provides us with an opportunity to publicize our own culture and make us feel warm."*

Both students emphasized the importance of the instructor's classroom techniques in helping them overcome cultural conflicts in the third space. Students' learning improved when instructors allowed them to use their own space, enabling two cultures to coexist without conflict, and creating a sense of freedom.

### ***Teacher's Strategies to Incorporate Shared Thoughts Navigating a Third Space***

It has been observed that when a course instructor encourages students to share their thoughts, relate their prior experiences to others, and help them identify gaps in existing practices, the students are better able to adapt to new cultures in a third space. Students reported feeling a sense of belonging to the same cultural group when the teacher addressed issues in this way. This is a significant factor in promoting cultural responsiveness in a diverse context.

### ***Developing Cross Cultural Understanding Through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy***

The following study delves into how an instructor promotes cross-cultural understanding of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) among graduate students by maintaining a consistent discourse throughout the class. CRP is a student-centric approach to teaching that acknowledges the significance of cultural references and recognizes the importance of a student's cultural background and experiences in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The participants in the study reported that they expect other courses to promote this kind of understanding. Additionally, the

students suggested that CRP is essential to bridge the cultural gap and develop content knowledge, particularly for those students who found it challenging to adapt to a new culture.

The study suggests that by implementing CRP, educators can address the gaps that exist in educational settings where international students may struggle to adapt to new cultural practices (Aziz, 2024). Previous studies indicate that effective teaching practices can promote CRP for diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To achieve this, teachers must demonstrate an ethic of caring toward their students' needs, motivations, and perspectives, regardless of their cultural background.

## Conclusion

Although previous research has explored the use of third space in educational contexts, no studies have investigated how this concept can help us understand the cultural challenges faced by international graduate students. This knowledge gap motivated me to conduct further research on this subject.

International graduate students face many learning complexities and cultural conflicts. They need to feel like they belong in their classroom to learn more effectively. To overcome their struggles, they want to rely on their course instructors as they see the classroom as a space where they can negotiate their conflicts. By adopting the third space, international students can liberate themselves from their imposed cultural identity. The classroom could have been used to help students connect with new cultures while preserving their existing cultural experiences. To achieve this, educational institutes in the U.S. should incorporate the essence of the third space perspective to create more spaces for international students. It is crucial to implement carefully chosen instructional approaches to facilitate support for learners who are struggling with cultural issues. The ultimate goal of using the third space theory is to liberate learners and help them overcome cultural and educational struggles.

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## Appendix A

### *Lead Interview Questions*

1. Do you consider yourself as marginalized? Why?
2. How do you feel about the cultural shift in a new place? Explain your experiences.
3. Who helps you most in the classroom? Your peers / teachers to overcome the struggles (if you ever feel any for language or other reasons)?
4. What are your expected instructional structures to liberate yourself in the classroom?
5. Have you noticed any specific classroom interaction in your class that helps you to think that you belong to the same class/culturally relevant? What are those?
6. Any recommendations?

## Appendix B

### *Transcription Convention*

|         |                 |
|---------|-----------------|
| ...     | Long pause      |
| ..      | Short pause     |
| Capital | Emphasized word |
| !       | Raised voice    |