

Case Study

English Language Experience of International Graduate Students Seen in the Asian Context: A Case Study of Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to examine the English Language experience of international students who pursue graduate programs in Singapore. International study or work experience has often been discussed in the topics of acculturation in communication scholarship and has provided important insights into the unique language challenges faced by students who move into new places, such as academic writing and speaking issues, social adjustment hassles, and so on. However, most of such discussions have been set in a Western context and also do not explore language as the central or the only topic of its discussion. In addition, articulations of language experience in an Asian context, especially in the setting of a multicultural and culturally accommodative (cosmopolitan) country of Singapore, is yet to be explored extensively. This study seeks to make a contribution in the context of this specific gap in research locating its insights specifically in the expressions of language experience among students in an Asian context. By using semi-structured in-depth interviews, the study seeks to collate and analyze English language experiences as well as identify connections between home and host country's language and cultural experience among international students in Singapore.

Keywords: English Language experience, home country, host country, international graduate students, Singapore

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 26 February 2017

Accepted: 30 April 2018

Published: 24 December 2018

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INTRODUCTION

The promotion of higher education internationalization is gradually but steadily receiving interest from students of various communities due to a number of reasons (Talebloo & Baki, 2013). By deciding

to go abroad to pursue an international program, students expect to be part of an education environment that possesses features such as an access to an experienced board of academic faculty staffs who have an international reputation, a student-centered system with focused career-orientation, chances to experience a cross-cultural life, well-established facilities, education standards which are widely recognized and eventually a promise of a rewarding profession in the future while holding degrees conferred by well-known institutions.

In terms of English proficiency particularly, there are unique challenges that a number of scholastic literatures have identified since this is a language deemed to be necessary for almost all academic paths not only within the period of student-being but also while they pursue a career (Hsu, 2009). A good command of English plays an important role in securing a satisfactory student life in a foreign country and when students return to their home country where they may engage in multiple activities requiring the knowledge of this language – owing to the ever-changing world where globalization is taking place (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010).

Achieving expected levels of English proficiency is considered a key challenge and is believed to present many difficulties for international students. This may especially be the case with non-native English speakers (NNES) (Andrade, 2006) such as international graduate students from Asia, the student cohort studied in this paper,

who may have practiced using English only as a second language (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Previous NNES studies grasp some usual problems that students from countries where English is not their mother tongue have to deal with in academic aspects, which could be categorized into four arrays: incoherent academic writing that gives birth to a chain of grammar and syntax mistakes, and ambiguous/awkward expression; issues in listening which lead to misunderstanding/misinterpretation; non-fluency in speaking which causes trouble in communication, especially when students are asked to join debates, seminar discussion, team work, presentation, and oral examination in which the content is unable to be exactly transmitted; and limited vocabulary which compresses the academic performance to a very basic and simple level (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lin & Yi, 1997).

Studies that deal with cultural adaptation issues such as difficulties in social adjustment, participation in classes, and extracurricular activities in multicultural universities cite the overwhelming extent to which English language knowledge helps determine both the academic and psychological adjustment of students (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Sometimes referred to as “Foreign Language anxiety” the concern to possess English language fluency among NNES has shown to impact the levels to which they are successfully able to achieve social connectedness and feel satisfied with their ability to efficiently mingle with fellow students, forging reliable relationships. This has also been suggested as an important

factor in establishing a social network outside of classroom conditions and to reach out to social support at times of need, all of which are important psychological coping strategies to deal with stress arising from the different living circumstances as well as unfamiliar academic situations (Lee & Rice, 2007; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Woodrow, 2006).

In terms of a graduate students' academic role, their proficiency in English not only impacts their performance but also their overall learning experience. As students who belong to a community where members mutually engage with others, share repertoires and engage in joint enterprises (Kim, 2011; Wenger, 2000), English language proficiency in both speaking and writing plays a crucial role in determining the success in their academic pursuits. Their multiple roles of being a student, practicing as a teaching assistant, being a supervisee, colleague and a member in their social circles demand functional and conversational knowledge of English besides the ability to engage in professional writing and thinking (Myles & Cheng, 2003). However, previous studies have limited themselves to discussing either academic or non-academic scenarios separately with little discussed holistically tying together the two scenarios. The absence of a comprehensive understanding of the whole experience of international students is noticeable.

Besides the host country experience, the home country experience does matter for their overall English language experience.

Partly owing to their cultural backgrounds and the style of language training received in their home countries, which focuses more on writing rather than speaking, high scores in the qualifying exams may not truly reflect students' competence (Kuo, 2011; Sun & Chen, 1999). It is not uncommon to see students reluctant to take part in classroom discussions or facing issues adapting to environments that may demand greater use of their speaking skills, as in the case of classroom presentations (Sawir, 2005). Factoring in some underpinning considerations, it is important to note that in many Asian countries, the possibility of having competent teachers/speakers is limited wherein many a time instructions may wholly or partly be provided in the native language and the opportunities to use English outside of classrooms are relatively limited. Besides the issues observed in speaking skills use, graduate students also face difficulties in producing effective professional/academic writing (Williams, 2017). Asian countries such as India and China have been noted for its reliance on writing and rote learning as key methods of education practiced in schools and colleges. In addition, opportunities to speak English such as conducting seminars or presentations are less relied options in teaching methods as well. Furthermore, English in most Asian countries is not the first language and is often seen as an aside/additional training in terms of gaining comfortable levels of proficiency in writing and speaking (Liyanage & Walker, 2014). As a possible consequence, students experience both writing and

speaking difficulties, especially when dealing with academic tasks. Oftentimes, the standards of writing expected in regard to language strength and creativity may not be achievable with existing levels training, exposure and knowledge they possess (Kim, 2006)

This may be particularly distressing for the students who have been high achievers in their home countries. The inability to effectively articulate themselves academically can work unfavorably toward their acculturation process (Kim, 2006). These studies grasping home country experience give us insights about the potential linkage between home country experience and host country experience. But they all fail to link these two experiences together and to focus on some specific perspectives. NNES studies (Huang, 2014; Lueg & Lueg, 2015; Shi, Harrison, & Henry, 2017) mainly pay attention to the pedagogical experience in intercultural interaction related to language use of international students. However, few research focus on the potential linkage with Universities' pedagogical culture. Furthermore, studies seem to reiterate pedagogical aspects, ignoring other experiences that also define students' international study experience such as circumstances outside academics.

To complement the theoretical understanding of life experience, neo-racism (Balibar, 2007) provides new perspectives toward the intercultural exchange. Neo-racism essentially implies that racism as a form of discrimination exists in international study environments in hierarchies. For

instance, Caucasian students are likely to suffer less owing to their race and the places they originate from in comparison to students who come from other regions and races such as students from Asia and Africa. Lee and Rice (2007) tried to use this frame to understand the negative experience perceived by international students. They found out that the perception of discrimination really existed, which was based on a cultural hierarchy wherein differences in the culture of an "other" (non-native speakers) group served to bolster sentiments of superiority of the native speakers. Specifically, while international students generally go through the feeling of discomfort, verbal discrimination and direct confrontation, Caucasian English-speaking international students are able to keep a close distance with local students and may suffer less. However, this perspective does not inspect the function of language use, as the focus is mainly on the adaptation process. The comprehensive understanding of language proficiency for international students, especially on the relationship with the cultural structure still remains blank. As language fluency may construct identities (Le Ha, 2009), it is important to account for this to build a comprehensive understanding of cultural structures.

Besides the frame of neo-racism, cultural shock theories give us new insight into international English language experience. The cultural, social, academic, and language issues all make up the transition costs in the experiences of international students (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

The paper, in light of the aforementioned literature, argues that insights of language experience among students need to be more profound and comprehensive in order to tie together experiences in academic, non-academic, and past language experiences. The paper likewise acknowledges that personal, social, and professional lives along with a person's background influence each other and do not work in isolation.

In keeping with the aforementioned statement, the paper tries to answer the following research questions. While the primary question is to answer the language experience in university life in general, the sub-questions specifically cover academic, non-academic and home country scenarios.

RQ: How would the students describe their English language experience in their university life?

RQa: How would the students describe their experience of English language use in academic tasks?

RQb: How would the students describe their experience of English language use in non-academic tasks such as extracurricular activities and social adjustment?

RQc: How would the students describe their experience of English language use in academic and non-academic settings in their home country?

From what we have observed, in terms of research on international students well-being, the focus is mainly set on undergraduate students who pursue programs in the United

States or European universities (Mills, 1997; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002) while studies on graduate students and in the Asian context are fewer and under-researched. Within the scale of this study which is an endeavor to fill the void as well as to provide a new insight into the experience of international graduate students, we try to examine the case of Singapore, a country that is emerging to be a global education hub in the Southeast Asian context owing to its competitive advantages. In particular, it is strategically located close to top source countries for international students. Singapore also possesses a strong academic reputation due to a well-developed public education system with world-class universities, private colleges, and a myriad of overseas campuses of western universities where English is the main medium of communication and instruction.

METHODS

The deployment of a qualitative approach is the salient feature of this research. Given the situation and the characteristics of the subject, phenomenology was identified to be the main theoretical framework embracing this study. The compatibility of this research tradition with qualitative approach has been researched and confirmed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

What we receive and reflect in the Results section of this report is totally based on interviews with three participants who are international graduate students and volunteered to take part in a semi-structured interview that concentrated on how they

express their experience with the English Language. The following paragraphs are designed to depict the sampling methods we employed to recruit interviewees, participants' specifications, procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as the process of data plausibility assurance.

Targeted Population

During the phase of data collection, we recruited participants by placing an invitation in an email sent to people who belong to our circle of familiarity at a public university in Singapore. Besides this, we also made direct phone calls to potential participants whom we thought fit our expectation. This study concentrated on full-time international graduate students (both at Master by Research and PhD levels) who already passed their first years at the university. This criterion is made based on the fact that by clearing at least 1 year, they went through all phases of a graduate student's life and collected some experience: living at least 1 year in another country other than their home country, attending courses (at least two per semester), engaging in conversations with their supervisors for at least two semesters, tutoring several classes during that time, defending their first draft of proposal by joining the Graduate Research Seminar which is a compulsory module, and participating in workshops held at their departments. The participants were from three different countries: one from China, one from India, and one from Vietnam. Two of them are female while the other is male all of whose age range is from 26-30 years.

Data Collection

We interviewed each participant, emphasizing their experiences with the English Language. Interviews were conducted at a location of participants' choice. The semi-structured in-depth interview was employed as the principal method since structured interview had the possibility of raising an uncomfortable atmosphere and an unstructured interview could lead to a myriad of scattered issues causing trouble for the information extracting process later. However, it is worth paying attention to the fact that even by using this interview format that is partly organized with a set of questions, unpredictable issues brought-up by respondents are not impossible (Berger, 2000).

At the beginning of the interview, every individual who agreed to participate was requested to fully read, understand, and sign an informed consent form that is composed by the researcher with details about this research including their rights, obligations, and benefits before joining. Participants were also guaranteed to be anonymously labeled since they have been given a pseudonym: Alex (from China), Rachel (from Vietnam), and Kate (from India), respectively. The interview guideline included a series of open-ended questions designed to investigate the experience with the English Language in their home and host countries.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min (the average length was around 45 minutes) and were audiotaped and transcribed. Each transcript was reviewed and double-checked

against the original recording to ensure accuracy. Thematic analysis was followed where the transcription was first coded using descriptive words as in open coding and then as a next step continued with secondary/axial coding where emerging concepts were clustered into themes from literature and assertions were formed. Field notes were taken during meetings and observations while other written works about learning goals, language education and international student's experience were also taken into consideration as sources for setting the theoretical foundation.

RESULTS

According to the data, two themes arise: (1) students' home country English language experience that focuses on the language pedagogy and the experience employing it in daily-life situations, and (2) students' host country experience, which is set in two contexts: their language experience in academic and non-academic settings.

Pre-Entry English Language Experience

By the term Pre-entry we refer to the time when the participants have had the English language experience in their respective home countries before they enrolled in the university. From our study, we gather that there appears a link between students' previous English language training, practice, and the perceived communication comfort in their English language use and experience now. The following sections detail these specific aspects identified with respect to

the students' language experience before the start of the university.

Pedagogy and Learning Experience.

The role of the education system and the quality of the language training program implemented in the home country are two salient elements that were described to form the language base for each international student. As schools were identified to be one of the primary settings to acquire knowledge on the language, the following teaching/pedagogy practices were identified to play a role in the perception of instructional quality to gain proficiency in the language. As Rachel described the teaching experience in her home country:

It was very structured, one-sided. It was more like a teacher instructs and we just take in. This is how it is. You give notes of the stories, of the points, of the novels the teacher really says the main points we never really, no one really said our main points could be different from their points.

Moreover, participants identify that there is a tendency of setting a focus on a few skills while the others are neglected or underestimated. This skewed focus is seen across the board. For instance as Kate stated: "You know, in my country, the teachers only focus on writing and reading skills, also grammar particularly" or likewise as Alex resonated: "For most Chinese people, writing and reading are not a big problem." it leaves out a blank space for the other two

skills, listening and speaking, because the students assert that they do not have chances to practise it properly with thoughtful guidance. Rachel gave a nod of agreement when she stated that: “[...] and the only problem is about speaking and listening.”

Besides this, being able to “think critically” and pursue subjects “thinking in English” as termed by Rachel, were other key features identified to achieving comfort levels in the use of the language in various capacities including speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Reflecting on the experience of English language taught in her home country, Rachel goes on to state that “No one really taught us how to reflect on the reading, how to be critical and even find out the major points from the text of whatever given to us.” This was a common perspective observed across the samples in our study; in that, the lack of critical thinking-based learning was described to have had an effect on the perceived comfort levels of using English at a later point of time. Students also described situations where they explored other sources of knowledge to enhance their use of skills besides the formal training they received. As explained by Rachel, upon her realization of the insufficiency of a mere “learning from textbooks strategy” that was predominantly followed, “Back to the time in college, I did economics and political science. I didn’t have modules in English [...] that was the time I started to read, the things I would read in English, i.e. not just books that were given to us.”

In addition to the aforementioned elements, living conditions were also identified to be a factor that impacted their English experience. According to Kate, the quality of education she received may have made a difference to her present struggles. Not having quality teachers or resources to help accomplish comfortable levels of language proficiency were key problems she faced in her academic training in the past:

When I left my hometown and became an undergraduate student, I had to learn English again because back to the time I still was in high school, I was not taught how to pronounce English words correctly, accurately. So, when I moved to the city, I had to learn English words by words again due to the fact that, the pronunciation method I had learnt before is totally wrong.

English Language Practice. Besides the challenges in pedagogical methods and learning experience that the respondents identified, students’ perception and description of the overall lack of practice of the language also influence their English experience in their home countries. On the one hand, respondents expressed that they lack chances to practise English. As Alex said “Before I came to Singapore, I rarely have the experience of speaking English... people around me all speak my mother tongue, we don’t have opportunities to speak English.” On the other hand, interviewers reflect that they likewise do not have the motivation to enhance the English language

skills. As Rachel expressed, “After school, I never spoke English. At that time it was just sort of a task for us. We never thought that this is something we should be imbibing.”

The discontinued and disrupted process of using the English language was seen across the students interviewed. Chances were stated to come up only in instances where they have had to prepare for a formal test (such as Graduate Record Examination—GRE; Test of English as a foreign language—TOEFL; or International English Language Testing System—IELTS) to clear out the language requirement set by the international university. This, as they described, is the only possible chance to spend more time on sharpening their speaking skills to make sure that they get a high score (“The only chance for me is when I had to prepare for the examinations like GRE and TOEFL which need proper preparation. That’s the only chance for me”). The other situations where they need to use the language are in environments where English is the main medium of communication (“[...] I worked in a foreign company. This company’s people are all foreigners who speak English. So I have to discuss work-related things with them using English”).

Post-Entry English Language Experience

Post-entry in this context is defined as the time that students build-up their perception of language experience after they commence their studies at the host country university. Participants identified factors to do with

their academic and non-academic life to influence their overall English language experience at the University. These are detailed in the subsequent sections.

Experience of English Language in Academic Settings. The respondents described situations where their own proficiency and confidence in using the language affected their experience of the language in the academic setting.

The graduate students in our study give an account of performing various roles through their time at the University. As students, supervisees and teaching assistants, the participants identified multiple circumstances where the continuous and conversant use of English was expected. Besides their general description of their language experience, they also brought-up particular difficulties perceived on various counts. These difficulties, as termed by our respondents specifically dealt with aspects of “reading,” “writing,” “listening” and “speaking” that form a part of each of the roles they assume.

Students generally voice that academic English is an advanced level of language use that employs a lot of terms, lingos, and jargons that are alien to them. Kate confessed that: “[...] and I have to deal with academic words that I totally feel strange, then if I do not use them frequently or at least repeat a word many times, at least three times actually, I cannot remember that word or its meaning.”

Writing, likewise, is a set of skills that is emphasized by graduate students owing to the fact that it takes time and effort to

improve. For non-native speakers, how to use the right word, choose the right syntax or limit grammatical mistakes are not easy tasks that they can master over one night. As Rachel expressed “Writing in English: it was to do with sentence construction. I used too many words when there was no need as such.” Yet this experience is not the same across students. For instance, as Alex claimed he does not “need very beautiful words” when writing for academic purposes, so writing skills did not concern him much.

Academic reading along the same lines is described as a set of skills acquired with practice and experience. Rachel captured this essence in her words when asked about what specific changes she has observed over the time she has spent in the University, “Reading has improved also. Now, I can read faster, and I can now see the important things in a paragraph.”

Besides these factors, the international university environment, in general, was stated to create various other problems in communication as well, given its multicultural scenario and the presence of differential accents and styles of speaking English. This was recorded to reflect in the various roles they assumed here that predominantly use speaking and listening as skills. For instance, as teaching assistants, there is a considerable expectation to spend time speaking and a perceived level of stress attached to the process of preparing for the classes and conducting them successfully:

Sometimes for some very complicated problems, you can explain very clearly in Chinese. But

in English, you don't know how to explain in English. So in the first tutorial, I remember that I have to explain a very complicated program to the students. After using English, I only confused myself... (Alex)

Adjusting to differences in accent is a persistent problem they face until they achieve familiarity. Chances to practice English in their home countries were described as key to shaping this experience they face now, as a Kate claimed: “I did not have many opportunities to practice English, I had not met many foreigners to practice so that my speaking as well listening skills were not good.” Yet they constantly adapt themselves taking even simple steps such as how Alex described “of repeating their words,” or as Kate expressed “of slowing down their pace of speech, grasping unfamiliar vocabularies,” and so forth until they perceive they have integrated to the academic environment to the necessary measure. As Rachel stated “Listening is better now. I can understand what is relevant and what is not. It is not as bad as before. There have been occasions where I haven't understood half the things. I have come out of that at least,” talking about her improvement of skills over time.

The university provides different forms of assistance such as English Language module and Academic Writing Consultation session that offers a one-by-one counseling hour to help out international students. However, it is not highly evaluated by students. As Rachel stated that: “I felt the service was not required...both my

supervisor and I felt that it was okay and not required....” The lack of popularity was likewise attributed to the pattern of English teaching conducted that focuses only on particular areas. As Kate described “Other skills were not quite emphasized so I think that writing skills might be the target one....”

Amidst the described processes of linguistic acculturation, participants also identify a pattern of mutual adaptation taking place. This was observed across various roles the students assume at the university. For instance, as Rachel described her teaching experience:

Sometimes it happens that I want to say something and in the middle of the sentence, I forget a word. The right word doesn't come to me. And then I ask them that I can't get the right word in my head can you tell me what it is... “This is the context and this is what I want to say”... So it has become very easy now...

Likewise, as Kate described her experience with her supervisor while she communicates in English “He knows how to answer me in a simple way, and he speaks quite slowly so that I can understand him....” It also appears, as students, peer-to-peer help is sometimes sourced to enhance perceived skill levels and proficiency in the language. As Rachel expressed about her foreigner friends: “they improved so much that... mainly by talking to friends and not really though reading articles....”

Experience of English Language in Non-academic Settings. As students living in a foreign country, participants also speak of immersing themselves into other non-academic and quotidian situations over and above their academic life. Based on our study, we realize this context broadly impacts their relationship with other fellow students from the academic space and their functional use of English—for their daily life.

Interviewers describe a range of problems in their non-academic English experience in these two contexts. For instance, language was observed to be a key factor that affected the extent to which students found their relationships more meaningful and “deep”—as remarked by Alex: “You tend to talk more with Chinese people. So the relationships between us and foreigners may not be deep enough like you and other Chinese people. So what you have is not that deep.”

Yet this is not an experience expressed across the board. “My closest friends here are Chinese” describes Rachel. She further goes on to express that “When you are speaking, it is really the content which matters, no one really looks at your English, and no one is that bad”...“...we all make fun of each other's English.”

In terms of general use of the language for their daily life, we gather that their experience is captured mainly in three broad areas. Articulation (“I feel difficult to express it (my opinions) in front of the class because I cannot find the right word which could interpret my thinking

from my native language into English”), vocabulary limitation (“I don’t remember the words when I ordered (the meal).”), and misunderstanding (“I write text messages thinking about something but the way they read text messages is very differently.”), which they indicate as factors that impact how they experience the language on the whole.

DISCUSSION

The results offer crucial evidence to outline the variation of English language experience of international graduate students in their home and host countries. At the outset, it appears that the perceived levels of comfort in using the language depend on the factors connected to their past experience of learning/practicing English at their home countries and their experience employing the language within and outside of academic responsibilities at the university in the host country. This is much in line with the studies that deal with acculturative experience of students in multicultural setups that identify the significance of English in not only shaping the adaptation experience of international students but also recognize that students’ confidence and comfort of using the language are affected by their past experience of using/learning it (Woodrow, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

We observe, in specific regard to the language experience of students in the host country, students describe situations where using English shaped their experience when playing multiple roles in the academic setting as well as in their social and daily

life. In terms of the language experience in the academic zone, the results of the study indicate that the nature of language experience is largely varying and subjective. This is across their language experience in their roles as a student, a tutor, and a supervisee. It was identified that the perceived levels of difficulty in identified key skills such as reading, writing are less stressful than skills of speaking and listening that they uniformly describe as being challenging for both academic and non-academic purposes. Yet, we observe that students identically explain each of these skills to be improving with time and experience. In terms of their language experience in non-academic settings, perceptions both vary and converge in different aspects. In contrast to studies that deal with English language anxiety among non-native speakers (Myles & Cheng, 2003) which claim that NNES move with fellow country students, we observe that the level of hesitance among NNES to establish relationships with foreigners is not across the board. While linguistic difficulty in relationship formation and sustenance is perceived, it was also noticed that there is a possibility of language not getting in the way of a meaningful social life. However, in terms of aspects of language experience in daily life, we recognize that experiences more or less converge. Articulation, vocabulary challenges, besides avoiding misunderstandings were common hassles faced by students conducting conversations with regard to their daily activities.

Finally, the oriental context, Singapore, brings fresh points to NNES studies. On the one hand, the oriental environment provides a special experience for international students. For example, the accents in Singapore present unique problems different to Western context. This special phenomenon brings some difficulties to international students and raises their transition cost as in the cultural shock theory. On the other hand, the oriental context seems to be more tolerant toward English proficiency of international students. The international students report that there is a mutual adaptation that they perceive to be transpiring, which includes their changing style and pace of using English and the corresponding linguistic adjustments made by other people. It is worthwhile noting that discrimination due to English proficiency as such is very rare. The neo-racism theoretical framework seems to work less in this scenario. These results can encourage future studies to pay more attention to the oriental context, especially comparing different contexts such as western and Asian to build a more comprehensive understanding of the English language experience perceived among international graduate students.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we look at the home and host country English language experience of international students who currently pursue graduate programs in Singapore. In their home countries, students embrace various experiences in pedagogical methods and have limited chances to practice English.

The host country experience, we realize, varies owing to each students' divergent academic backgrounds and former English language experience. Our study identifies this experience to be comprised of two domains. First, the academic expectations at graduate-level programs in terms of English language use is definitely higher than expectations in lower levels (undergraduate or high school). Furthermore, this is across the board in all academic activities they are expected to engage in such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. A key aspect of this changing experience is the mutual adaptation in communication that takes place between students and people surrounding them. Second, English language use in non-academic scenes are also perceived as integral to the overall language experience in the university. The proficiency of the language is seen as important to overcome discomfort and inhibitions while mingling in social networks or everyday life.

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