



Language ability and Vietnamese postgraduate students' experiences in a Western country

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ABSTRACT

International students' experiences are a major concern for universities and educational researchers. Globally, Vietnam is a top source country for international students but little is known about their experience.

This study explores the everyday experiences of 10 Vietnamese master's students from a New Zealand university through a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach enabled me to capture the essential meanings of the participants' experiences and understand what it was like to be Vietnamese students in New Zealand.

In academic settings, the students initially struggled to deal with a range of problems related to language and communication. These made them feel overwhelmed and bewildered. During these formative months, many of them experienced language difficulties. These difficulties forced them to learn to deal with challenges and become independent.

This research helps universities become more aware of the experience of foreign students studying at the host universities, and thereby take measures to support them in their studies and daily life.

Keywords: *experience, international students, language, learning, life*

1. Introduction

For many students, studying overseas is like a dream come true. But what is it like to be an international student? What do insiders talk about their first-hand experiences? Is it as rosy

as what marketers of educational institutions always say? To answer these questions, in this study, I explore the experiences of Vietnamese postgraduate students in New Zealand.

Many international students are from countries where English is a foreign or second language. Therefore, much of their choice of destinations has traditionally targeted the Anglophone countries because of the global status of English as a global language, and students' desire to develop their English language skills (Nogami, 2020). Many view improvements in their language ability as a benefit of overseas study (Chien, 2020). Although there are English language requirements for many universities (e.g., the IELTS test - International English Language Testing System), meeting the requirement does not guarantee students' ability to effectively deal with language issues in daily life and study (Elturki et al., 2019).

Overseas study is not just about acquiring a degree. International students' experiences are multifaceted and related to their academic and everyday settings (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). International students may have a mix of pleasant and less favourable experiences during their studies. Education is what makes their experiences different from those of other groups of sojourners (Ward et al., 2001).

Studying overseas may be an enriching experience for some. Lillyman and Bennett (2014) and L. T. Tran (2016) highlights aspects of personal development, including raised levels of self-confidence, independent thinking, career opportunities, and professional development. Others have found that studying abroad can develop students' intercultural competence (Maharaja, 2018; M. N. Nguyen & Robertson, 2020).

Social challenges include students' ability to build meaningful relationships with locals, isolation, and housing issues (Marginson et al., 2010). The literature suggests that international students rely heavily on their co-national networks for social, psychological, and academic support (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Difficulties in forming relationships with local students are associated with language difficulties and cultural differences (Li & Pitkänen, 2018; Robinson et al., 2020). Some international students have not lived away from their extended families before studying overseas, and some lack the practical life skills needed for living independently (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Some students struggle with cooking their own meals, budgeting, sourcing food, cleaning, and organising transport and accommodation. As a result, living in a foreign country can be overwhelming.

2. Literature review

2.1. Language issues in academic settings

Many international students are from countries where English is a foreign or second language. Therefore, much of their choice of destinations has traditionally targeted the Anglophone countries because of the global status of English as a global language, and

students' desire to develop their English language skills (Nogami, 2020). Many view improvements in their language ability as a benefit of overseas study (Chien, 2020). Although there are English language requirements for many universities (e.g., the IELTS test - International English Language Testing System), meeting the requirement does not guarantee students' ability to effectively deal with language issues in daily life and study (Elturki et al., 2019).

The literature on international students emphasises the critical role of language in students' cross-cultural experiences. Language may pose challenges to students in both academic and non-academic settings (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Andrade, 2006; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), which makes their experience unique compared to those of local students' (Education New Zealand, 2018). Language difficulties relating to oral communication may result from unfamiliar accents, limited vocabulary, and pace of speech (Chien, 2020; Li et al., 2018; Smith, 2020).

In the academic setting, international students may need considerable time to become familiar with using a different language (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Language issues may become apparent when they read materials (Smith, 2020) and produce long pieces of academic writing, for example, dissertations (Qi & Li, 2020). One of Li et al.'s (2018) participants said that he sometimes needed to look up unfamiliar words in his dictionary, which meant he failed to follow the lecture. In Sawir et al.'s (2012) study on the role of language proficiency in the security of students from non-English speaking countries in Australia, participants reported having problems with academic writing. Many needed to translate their work from their mother tongue into English, which potentially made their writing sound unnatural to native speakers. The authors argued that language proficiency is a key to students' active human agency. A lack of language fluency contributes to their limited confidence, which results in their behaviours being interpreted as passive.

International students may have difficulties communicating with instructors and classmates due to language issues, and as a result, they may prefer to sit together speaking their native language rather than interact with domestic students (Smith, 2020). They may find it hard to engage in group work (e.g., discussions or class presentations) which involves written and verbal communication skills (Li, 2017; Smith, 2020).

Terminology and subject-specific technical language may present difficulty and anxiety to international students (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). Low language proficiency affects their academic achievement (Andrade, 2006; Andrade & Hartshorn, 2019; Chien, 2020) and understanding of teachers' speech (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Students' improvement in language ability helps them understand course content (Li, 2017).

2.2. Language issues in everyday settings

In the everyday setting, proficiency in the language of the host country facilitates international students' sociocultural adaptation and interaction with local students

(Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Yu et al., 2019). Better language skills are associated with a higher level of life satisfaction (Deloitte, 2008). In discussing the work experience of international students in Australia, Nyland et al. (2009) linked student-workers' language deficiency to their vulnerability. Sawir et al. (2012) identified challenges coming from language barriers, including isolation from local people, poor social interaction and adjustment, inability to integrate socially with the host community, stereotypes of locals, higher cultural stress, and lower level of life satisfaction. Language difficulties may involve both international and local students. Although having few problems in everyday communication, the Indian students in Kukatlapalli et al. (2020) had difficulties with the local New Zealand accent. Similarly, locals had difficulty with the Indian accent.

In summary, language has an important role in international students' experiences, including their learning and everyday experiences. In the academic setting, language issues may affect students' academic performance. In the everyday setting, language difficulties are likely to affect students' communication with people from different linguistic backgrounds. Overall, students' adjustment to the host environment may be affected by their lack of competency in the native language.

3. Research method

The study population was 10 Vietnamese international postgraduate students at VUW. The research site is VUW, which is a research-intensive university. Located in Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand, it offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and has over 22,000 students, 3,600 of whom are from outside the country. It has partnerships with universities and organisations around the world and provides a joint programme in premises at a partner university in Vietnam.

Based on the research topic and the qualitative-oriented research method, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews which are appropriate to this phenomenological research (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

I analysed and interpreted the transcripts after the completion of all interview transcriptions, following the IPA guidelines by Smith and colleagues, which included six steps (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

1. Reading and re-reading the transcripts
2. Initial noting
3. Developing emergent themes
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes
5. Moving to the next cases
6. Looking for patterns across all cases

4. Results

This overarching theme focuses on the students' difficulties with language. Living in a foreign country which is strikingly different from their home countries in terms of language and culture poses considerable challenges to the students. These issues significantly affected the students' interactions with others of different cultural backgrounds and could lead to their withdrawn behaviours.

4.1. Language difficulties in everyday setting

This theme encapsulates the language difficulties that the students encountered in the everyday setting. When it came to the students' language difficulties, the communicative function of language was often cited as having a vital role. The ability to communicate effectively was associated with their capability to perform socially. In response to the questions about difficulties in everyday life, the students acknowledged that they lacked practical knowledge about how to start a conversation in New Zealand. Trying to make sense of her difficulties with language at her workplace, Ly emphasized that talking to a New Zealander would be different from talking to a Vietnamese person and that it was important to understand how to engage in conversations with them. She thought that it was important to 'see the differences between locals and the Vietnamese' in terms of conversation conventions and that Vietnamese people 'could not communicate with them [locals] in the same way as with the Vietnamese'.

The students had difficulties conversing with local people. They did not know what clues to refer to when conversing. This influenced how they felt when receiving a message. One student said she didn't know when to close the conversation:

Sometimes I don't know where to stop [the conversation]. People may be busy, so I shouldn't continue talking. But if I close the conversation, I don't know if I am impolite or not. I really don't know what sign to refer to. (Bao)

Nine out of ten students had bachelor's degrees in English language, which suggested that they had a strong foundation of the language. Despite this, their responses in the interviews showed that they lacked opportunities to use the language to communicate, especially with English native speakers. Reflecting on her language learning in Vietnam, Bao explained that she had extensive knowledge about 'academic English', implying that she knew how to use English in academic writing and reading, but not in everyday life. Arriving in New Zealand and confronting with communication in everyday life left her with a feeling of low self-esteem:

At school, I learned a lot about academic English. When I was thrown into this society, my reaction in daily communication is worse than a kid. (Bao)

The local accent was difficult for the students to understand. Perhaps what the students needed was time to realize the sounds and make sense of what they heard. It would be useful if the people they talked with spoke clearly. Besides, the use of slang or colloquial

language were common in everyday conversations but could contribute to the students' language difficulties. In this case the use of plain English could enable the students to have better understanding. The students were concerned that the flow of conversations could be affected if they kept asking for repetition. The following extracts from Vy and Hai's interviews support these ideas:

Their accents are hard to understand. Only after they [New Zealand friends] talked to for a while did I understand what they were talking about. When I talked to them, I had to ask them to repeat a few times. (Vy)

In conversations with locals, I am not a native speaker, there are many slangs that I can't understand. When I communicate with them, they usually use these slangs. Sometimes I can't understand. Or they told a story and I couldn't understand, so the conversation is disrupted. (Hai)

Language difficulties threatened the students' social lives by discouraging them from interacting with other people in English. In the cases of Vy and Hai above, not wanting to cause disruption to conversation might result in their silence during the exchanges. Another student, Tam, reported that her social interaction was influenced by her language ability. She had difficulties in getting her message across.

Language difficulties might have a profound effect on the students' emotions and affect the students' self-perceptions. One student reported that she felt bad when facing problems in communication. She even questioned herself and compared herself with other international students. She doubted her ability to effectively communicate in the foreign language:

At first, I was a little bewildered and worried because I didn't understand [when people speak in English]. Some of my friends learned English [as a foreign language] and it is not their mother language. I wondered how they could speak English fluently, but I couldn't. (Thanh)

In the following extract, Bao recalled an instance when someone asked her about her academic discipline, and her feeling at that time:

When people asked me 'What is your discipline?' I certainly have to answer that I major in TESOL. Then they asked, 'What does TESOL mean?' I said that it means teaching English. But when I said that I felt reluctant. They might wonder how I can teach English when my English is that bad. (Bao)

The students suffered from low self-confidence. Being ashamed to communicate while making mistakes had a significant impact on the students' confidence. Bao was self-conscious about a possible lack of accuracy in speaking and was concerned that she would make mistakes when speaking. She remarked that because she was a language student, she paid special attention to the accuracy:

[In Vietnam] I didn't have that feeling, but here I do. [I thought that] my English was not that bad. But I have been here [in New Zealand] for one year, but I still make some

grammatical mistakes when speaking. I still feel uncomfortable when speaking [in English]. I don't know how students in other disciplines feel [about speaking in English], but maybe I am an English teacher and I always pay attention to mistakes. So now I still feel uncomfortable. (Bao)

4.2. Language difficulties in the academic setting

Language issues are common for international students, especially those who are in their first year and speak English as a foreign language. Most of the participants reported difficulties with language. Language played a fundamental role in shaping the students' learning experience. Issues with language may be related to understanding different accents, reading academic texts, and writing assignments. These problems may be associated with difficulties in understanding lectures and academic texts. This theme includes two sub-themes – different accents and writing assignments and reading materials.

4.2.1. Struggling with different accents

This theme is about the students' struggles with lecturers' accents in class. As indicated on the university website, Victoria University of Wellington has about half of the academic staff who were born overseas. At some other New Zealand universities, the number may be higher. For example, at the University of Otago, over 70% of academic staff were either born outside New Zealand or achieved their doctorate overseas. This suggests that in many academic departments of New Zealand universities, the academic staff comes from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and a variety of English accents will be used. There is a chance that students will encounter a teacher with accented English.

Most of the students in this study reported difficulties with different accents of teachers in class. Those difficulties affected the students' understanding of lectures. This was especially the case during their first few months. In the interviews, the students reported on their worries about language issues. The students explained that their unfamiliarity with the New Zealand accent affected the students' understanding of lectures. Some typical quotes include:

New Zealand accent was hard to follow. In that class, my understanding of the lecture was limited. (Hai)

Other students had similar comments about the difficulties of following different accents. Besides attributing the difficulty in understanding some teachers' accents, the students explained that it was difficult for them to catch information due to the speaking pace of some lecturers. Thanh, for example, reported that she was unable to understand lectures and catch up with what lecturers were saying because they spoke fast.

Although in Vietnam, English is the medium of instruction in many subjects, especially for students from the TESOL program, the students still encountered difficulties in understanding lectures due to differences in accents and ways of teaching. Most language textbooks in Vietnam are modelled on either American English or British English. The students typically described what they thought concerning these differences as follows:

I think that we Vietnamese are familiar with American English or British English, so we expect that we can understand what people say here [in New Zealand]. But after arriving in here, we realized that New Zealand English was different from other 'Englishes'. [...] It was difficult for me to understand when people spoke English. (Thanh)

Reflecting on their experiences, the students felt more comfortable with the accent of Vietnamese teachers and the way those teachers used English in teaching. Thanh, for example, had difficulties with the accents of New Zealand academics because their accents were 'different from the Vietnamese's accent'. Besides, Vietnamese teachers can code switch or use Vietnamese to help students understand difficult points. Usually, when teaching English-major students, besides using English, a teacher in Vietnam may use Vietnamese to enhance students' understanding of lectures or to explain about Vietnamese social and cultural issues or telling a funny story that may be difficult to understand if expressed in English. Lan's interview suggested that she valued the ability of teachers to explain ideas in students' mother tongue, but at the same time, she acknowledged that it is necessary to improve her English. English is the medium of instruction in New Zealand, and she could not get desired study results if she failed to do so.

The English that we learn in Vietnam is different from the English here (in New Zealand). The lecturer might speak too fast or something like that. [...] I couldn't follow what the lecturers said. I was worried. I was familiar with the way Vietnamese lecturers spoke, and sometimes they used Vietnamese to help us understand difficult ideas. But here, if I don't understand [what lecturers said], I won't be able to do exercise. (Lan)

4.2.2. Struggling with writing assignments and reading materials

This theme deals with the students' issues related to completing assignments and understanding materials. The students experienced anxiety when encountering these issues. Reading and writing in the academic context may pose problems for anyone, including local students, but this was especially the case for international students because English was not their mother tongue.

Writing assignments was a daunting task for most of the students, especially during their first trimester. After studying for nearly a year, Lan said that she still had "difficulties with academic writing". Hai reported that he encountered issues at the sentence level, and the problem was exacerbated when he was required to write a long assignment.

After I completed a sentence, I read it and found that I didn't write it well and it didn't have any meaning in the paragraph. It was difficult, especially when I had to complete an assignment of 6000 words. (Hai)

Reading issues were complicated. When the students had difficulties with understanding a text, it may be because they lacked professional knowledge in their field, or because of their language ability, or both. Reading is a complicated process and is especially challenging for international students. It requires students to not only know the meanings of words but also have the professional knowledge to understand an academic text. This

may also be related to the reading skill of students, that is how they find, link and make sense of the information that they want. The students in this study used English as a foreign language, and perhaps their difficulties with reading comprehension were associated with these issues. The extract below represents Lan's attempt to make sense of her problem with reading academic texts and suggests that her problem was at least related to a lack of vocabulary and professional knowledge:

What I am concerned about is reading. Perhaps I don't have adequate knowledge or perhaps I don't have enough vocabulary to understand. So, it is really demanding to read articles. Sometimes I understand all the words, but I don't understand what the article is saying. Although I read much, I remember or understand little. [...] Sometimes I am under pressure when it is almost time to go to school, but I still don't understand the readings. [...] In class, I can't grasp what the teachers said. After a few classes like that, I wanted to give up. I was stressed. (Lan)

Tam and Hai said that they needed much more time than their flatmates (i.e., students whose mother tongue is English) to complete the required readings. They had to read academic texts slowly and read them many times to understand. In these cases, what Tam, Hai and other participants needed was time to make sense of what they were reading.

Reading materials with a lot of technical terms and abstract concepts presented problems to the students. In this regard, coupled with a lack of vocabulary in English, jargon added to the difficulty of understanding academic texts. This difficulty was related to a lack of professional knowledge. The following extracts from Trung and Lan's interviews showed their experience with those difficulties:

Some materials are difficult for me to understand. I had to read repeatedly. There was a lot of jargon and the topic was abstract. (Trung)

There are heaps of new vocabularies and technical terms. It was really difficult and took time to understand. (Lan)

In fact, understanding academic texts may pose a problem to any students, including local students. However, international students may encounter issues that local students do not experience. It was challenging for the participants to understand jargon and abstract concepts, not only because those jargons and concepts were associated with professional knowledge but also because they were written and explained in a foreign language. This led the students to face the double difficulties of professional and linguistic knowledge, which contributed to the unique experience of the international students compared to local students.

5. Discussion

The students' desire to improve their English motivated them to study in Aotearoa-New Zealand, an English-speaking country. However, language issues contributed to their difficulties, for example, communicating with others and understanding course content. Such issues limited cross-cultural interactions, especially with the host community. These

findings are in line with previous studies showing that international students may encounter language difficulties both within and outside the university (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Andrade, 2006; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Park et al., 2017; Vu, 2013).

Language proficiency is a key contributing factor to the active human agency of many international students with a non-English speaking background (Sawir et al., 2012) and may affect their evolving sense of self and transition from the old sites to the new ones (Marginson et al., 2010). A lack of language fluency may contribute to their low level of self-confidence and reluctance to reveal their communicative weaknesses by engaging in discussion, which potentially results in their being misinterpreted as being passive (Li, 2017; Sawir et al., 2012). Students' feelings of insecurity, homesickness, and vulnerability are exacerbated by language difficulties (Nyland et al., 2009; Tian & Lu, 2018). These challenges may make it difficult to engage socially with locals (Sawir et al., 2012).

International students' struggles with language have been documented in the literature. Kukatlapalli et al. (2020), for example, found that Indian students in New Zealand sometimes grapple with the local accent. Andrade and Hartshorn (2019) show that international students from an ESL (English as a Second Language) background may have extensive passive knowledge of the language but lack opportunities to use it to communicate in real life, contributing to their limited language ability. In reviewing the factors affecting international students' adjustment, Andrade (2006) suggests that teachers' accents, use of colloquial English, and rapid speech may be difficult for international students to understand. My study supports these findings. In the case of the Vietnamese students, language difficulties stemmed from their limited opportunities for interacting with English speakers in Vietnam. Most of them had a bachelor's degree in the English language and had learned English at least since secondary school. However, in Vietnam, few English teachers at universities were native speakers. Additionally, the English language taught in Vietnam differs from the one that they encountered in Aotearoa-New Zealand. In everyday life, there are a variety of accents and people may speak faster than teachers in Vietnam. This made it difficult for the students to gain familiarity with English as it is spoken in the country.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore how Vietnamese postgraduate students adjusted to academic and social lives in New Zealand. I was interested in understanding how Vietnamese students made sense of their living and studying experiences and wished to capture the essence of their experiences.

Although New Zealand universities host an increasing number of Vietnamese students, little is known about their experiences concerning living circumstances and few studies focus specifically on Vietnamese international students' experience. No research has focused on Vietnamese master's students in New Zealand. Although studies on

Vietnamese students in other countries provide insights into their experiences, there are fundamental differences between New Zealand and those countries. Addressing this gap, my study has offered insights into the living experience of Vietnamese students in New Zealand. The students encountered a range of issues, including following lectures, understanding academic texts, and doing assignments.

To date, few studies have explored the experiences of Vietnamese students in Aotearoa-New Zealand, especially in everyday settings. My study offers insights into an important aspect of their experiences which are related to housing and living arrangements. By focusing on these aspects, the study has offered a rich account of what it was like to be a Vietnamese student in Aotearoa-New Zealand. It has shown how issues in living arrangements might affect their learning experience and how they dealt with problems.

Most previous research on Vietnamese international students has been survey-based, standard case studies, or employed narrative inquiry. A relatively homogenous group of participants has allowed me to identify and capture the nuanced aspects and the shared essence of individual experiences within a particular group. A small sample enabled me to obtain rich and in-depth accounts of their experiences and understand how they made sense of the experiences.

The sample of this study was small and comprised 10 Vietnamese students at a university in Wellington, New Zealand, and was from three disciplines. Due to the constraints of the project, I was unable to interview the students before they came to New Zealand or after they returned to Vietnam. I did not observe the students in their classes. The participants might feel uncomfortable when talking about some potentially important aspects of their experiences (e.g., romantic relationship) because of my gender and my age. Based on these limitations, I present suggestions for further research in the next section.

Besides interviews, observing participants in the settings can help researchers gather rich data about their experiences. Doctoral students tend to stay in host countries for a longer period than master's students and as a result, they may have different experiences. Being accompanied by their families in host countries might significantly affect students' adjustment experiences. In the light of these considerations, it is worth focusing on these student cohorts.

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