

## **CULTURAL INSIGHTS IN GRADUATE SEMINARS: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES**

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### **Abstract:**

This study delves into the immersive experiences of international graduate students hailing from China, Korea, and Taiwan while actively engaging in seminar discussions within the context of an American university in the southwest. Over a span of two months, data were meticulously gathered from three distinct graduate classes. Beyond linguistic proficiency, the research unearthed pivotal factors, notably goal orientation and one's sense of self within the classroom discourse, which emerged as significant themes embedded in the international students' encounters. The findings underscore the influential role played by classroom instructors and fellow students, who assumed mediating roles as these participants navigated their educational journey. Furthermore, these instructors and peers functioned as reflective mirrors, offering insights into the identities and roles of international students in the seminar classroom. This intricate interplay between participants and the educational environment paints a comprehensive picture of the dynamics at play in shaping the academic experiences of international graduate students.

**Keywords:** International Graduate Students, Seminar Discussions, Classroom Dynamics, Educational Experiences, Cross-Cultural Learning.

### **Introduction**

Graduate students typically constitute almost half of the international student population (NCES, 2008), and they are typically required by their graduate programs to participate in classroom discussion. However, little research has focused on how these international students navigate through classroom talk. Despite the fact that active participation is required for academic success, coupled with the goal of most universities to foster cross-cultural interaction to increase intercultural competency, many studies have shown that most international students, especially those from East Asian countries, are less likely than American students to comment during classroom discussion (Dunnett, 1985; Hsieh, 2007; Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Kim, 2006; Tompson & Tompson, 1996), and there is evidence that international students are not likely to have substantial communication with their American peers (Trice, 2004). What is more, findings suggest that U.S. faculty believe that the behaviors most responsible for impeding international students' academic success are: (a) their lack of participation in classroom discussions, their lack of participation in debate with classmates or instructors, and (c) their failure to ask for clarification of issues or of assignments that are unclear (Tompson & Tompson, 1996). In this study, we explored the experience of international graduate students from China, Korea, and Taiwan, while participating in graduate seminar classroom discussions. The results contribute to a better understanding of intercultural communication in the classroom, which will ultimately lead to a better learning environment for both international and domestic students.

In the following sections, we present the three recurring themes that emerged from the existing literature.

### ***Linguistic Ability***

There are significant differences between conversational skills and formal academic communication skills, the latter requiring much more time to acquire (Cummins, 1983). Although many international students seem competent when conversing in daily life, they may still find it difficult to participate in higher-level classes and seminar discussions (Brown, 2008; Kim, 2006). Particularly, Kao and Gansneder (1995) discovered that international students from Asia cited problems with English as a reason for not speaking in class significantly more often than international students from other countries. In her study on East Asian international graduate students, Kim (2006) concluded that leading classroom discussion and participating in whole-class discussions are the greatest concerns of these students. They also reported that making and comprehending formal oral presentations and are the most important skills for academic success and that correct pronunciation of English is the least important skill.

Increasing the minimum language proficiency requirement for admission may not guarantee sufficient linguistic ability for a successful classroom experience. Brown's (2008) study suggested that international students, even those with high scores in English proficiency, felt disadvantaged and illprepared for classroom discussion. International students' English is unlikely to be as good as that of native speakers, and this comparison often causes feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. Brown (2008) found that embarrassment resulting from language problems is often manifested through actions like shy smiles, blushing, avoidance of eye contact, and nervous laughter. To avoid embarrassment, they would avoid talking in class.

### ***Emotional State***

Studying classroom talk, You and Schaller (1992) found that some students felt nervous and were afraid of asking questions. Indeed, speaking up in class is a form of public speaking, which often causes anxiety. Furthermore, Daly (1991) and Brown (2008) explained that because speaking a second language imposes a greater degree of uncertainty, apprehension and anxiety may occur when students are struggling in the language.

Some researchers in second language learning have argued that language anxiety is a specific construct that should be separated from the construct of learning anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), for example, showed that although trait anxiety, state anxiety, and test anxiety may affect language learners, there seems to be a specific type of anxiety that is more specific to language learning. Thus, nonnative speakers may experience anxiety in their regular academic courses, especially those that involve large participatory components.

### ***Cultural Differences***

Results of many studies have indicated that international students from Asian countries may have difficulty appreciating that any learning takes place in classroom discussion (Johnson, 1997; Tam et al., 2009). Scollon and Wong-Scollon (1990) and Zongren (1984) discovered that if a teacher plunges right into a discussion, Asian students often interpret this as an indication of poor teaching (as cited in Liberman, 1994). Additionally, students may lack respect for instructors who appear to lack knowledge by inviting conjecture or allowing interruptions (Johnson, *ibid.*). Finally, Liberman (1994) demonstrated that although most Asian international students in his study agreed that classroom discussions encourage the interchange of ideas and promote creative thinking, they questioned the quality of learning when there were many discussions instead of lectures during the class period.

Another important cultural difference noted in some research, especially pertaining to the countries represented in this study, is the importance of creating and maintaining harmony in the group

(Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Shigaki, 1987). Classroom discussions, during which new ideas are formed and new ways of thinking are explored, usually evoke critical thinking and disagreement. What is postulated, thus, is that classroom discussions, such as those found in seminar classes, can be not only unfamiliar to some international students, but also something they want to avoid. Therefore, it is not surprising that the nonassertive behavior of some international students might be viewed as low participation in class (Kao & Gansneder, 1995).

In light of the literature discussed in this section, there are three questions that have emerged to guide this study: (a) How much does the cultural background of international graduate students influence the seminar experience? (b) How do such students navigate through seminar discussions with limited language proficiency? (c) What are the factors that influence their participation in seminar discussions?

## **Method**

### ***Participants and Setting***

The focal participants of the study were international graduate students from China, Korea, and Taiwan, studying at a major university in the southwestern region of the United States. In the initial stage of this study, a significant theme that emerged from the data was the influence of instructors and fellow classmates on the seminar experience. Consequently, we included their classmates and instructors as secondary participants in the study because they provided important contextual information.

Given that the definition of what an international student is can vary, it is important to describe the characteristics of those who participated in this study. English was not the first language of the focal participants. All the focal participants had finished their undergraduate degrees (and some obtained master's degrees) in their home countries and had come to the United States solely for the pursuit of their graduate studies. We excluded as focal participants any international students whose first language was English and those who had come to the United States because of marriage or family immigration. These individuals, however, served as secondary participants in our study.

Another common characteristic among the focal students was that they all had been in the United States for only one to two years, except for one who had been in the United States for her graduate studies for about five years. For all the focal participants, this was their first experience as students in an American university.

In terms of the setting of this study, the first author, acting as the principal investigator, observed three graduate classrooms in three disciplines (Biology, Education and Music) over a two-month period during a single semester. This was a convenience sample, in which no particular disciplines were targeted, but in which we attempted to recruit participants across a variety of disciplines. These disciplines were selected because of the availability of the class, the willingness of the instructor and students to participate, and so forth. Combined, we started with 10 focal participants and 35 secondary participants, including 3 classroom instructors and 32 classmates. All the instructors were females; 6 focal students were females and 4 were males; 26 of the secondary student participants were females and 6 were males.

### ***Procedure***

At the start of the semester, the principal investigator (first author) recruited participants in all three classes and obtained personal background information to determine which individuals would meet the criteria as focal participants. The principal investigator observed the classroom sessions, took field notes, and made audiotapes of a selection of classroom discussions over two months. Throughout the semester, the principal investigator conducted semi-structured interviews in order to understand the participants' classroom experiences. These included questions about interaction with the instructor and classmates and

the instructors' pedagogical choices. Participants also completed short questionnaires concerning their experiences during a specific class session. Follow-up correspondence by e-mail with students and instructors was used to clarify observations made in the classroom, as well as the participants' responses to questionnaires and interviews.

The primary data sources for this investigation were from (a) transcripts of interviews, (b) observation notes taken during each class, (c) results of the participant information forms with personal background questions, (d) e-mail correspondence with the students and instructors, and (e) results of the short questionnaire concerning students' experience during specific class sessions. Secondary data sources included (a) audio tapes of classroom discussions, (b) course syllabi, (c) readings, (d) discussion guides, and (e) copies of students' assignments.

All 10 of the focal participants whom we recruited were interviewed. However, two of these students were ultimately excluded because of their inability to effectively communicate with the researcher. Based on the rationale of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) theoretical sampling, 10 of the secondary student participants were selected for interviews. In composing this group of 10 participants, we interviewed both talkative and quieter students. We also looked for secondary participants who appeared to provide us with richer contextual information. In particular, we attempted to select participants who had varied interactions and rapport with the international students in the class.

### **Data Analysis**

The specific type of qualitative techniques and methods used in the analysis of this study comes from a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The steps of data collection and analysis in a grounded theory approach are not sequential, but overlapping. Because we analyzed data as they were collected, earlier analysis provided us with a focus for the succeeding data collection. For example, "culture," "teacher" and "classmates" were categories that emerged in the early stage of the analysis.

As an example of how data were coded, here is a focal participant's recollection of her experience in the classroom:

I got to think that if it happens in Korea, we might have to paraphrase some expression in order for the person who is raising the issue to look more proper (coded "culture"). Right, it was brave. But in the context of yesterday's class, it was all right because I knew Dr. E is not the person who might be upset by that kind of remark (coded "teacher"), and I was expecting Dr. E would react to that remark in much more funny way. (Coded "teacher")

Consequently, we asked the participants more questions about their instructors' characteristics, and in our analysis, we explored common instructor qualities that encouraged classroom discussion. This process also led us to expand the study's parameter to include both international and American students, as well as the instructors.

The entire process of analysis resulted in a series of themes. As analysis continued, it became clear that some of these themes could be grouped into larger categories, while other categories could be broken down into smaller, more specific categories. We continued to review the data in an effort to find key relationships among categories until we reached saturation.

We established trustworthiness and scientific validity of our study through prolonged engagement with the participants, persistent observation, triangulation of the data, and member checking. Additionally, we validated the abstract interpretation of the data by comparing it to the raw data.

### **Findings**

#### **General Description of Participation**

We never doubted the possibility of finding students who would stand in contradiction to the stereotype of the “silent Asian” international student. Previous research has indicated that students who rarely talk and those who are relatively talkative in class are found among both American students and international students from Asia (Schallert et al., 1993). The results of the present study confirmed those of previous research. In all three classes, there was always at least one international student who had about the same number of speaking turns as any of the American students.

Table 1 offers a depiction of the various class members across three discussions in one class, one from the beginning of the study, another in the middle, and the last one toward the end of the study. We chose this class because the results displayed a variety of participation patterns of half of our original pool of focal participants. (Note: The other two classes showed similar results.)

**Table 1. Class Member Participation Across Three Discussions.**

	No. of turns 9/13	Percent	No. of turns 10/4	Percent	No. of turns 10/18	Percent	Total Percent
<i>American Student s</i>							
Rose	12	8%	6	3%	5	1%	12%
Matt	7	4%	1	<1%	12	4%	9%
Wonda	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0%
Bert	5	3%	13	7%	3	1%	11%
Elle	5	3%	19	10%	18	6%	19%
<i>International Stud ents</i>							
Wu	18	12%	14	7%	17	6%	25%
Ping	0	0 %	6	3%	0	0%	3%
Yun	0	0 %	1	<1%	0	0%	1%
May	1	<1%	3	1%	0	0%	2%
Sook	2	1%	1	<1%	0	0%	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: Names are pseudonyms.

This table shows an example of one student (Wu) who went against the stereotype of the “silent Asian” international student. Although for two of the discussions, the focal students as a group took about 13% of the speaking turns; the majority of these turns were Wu’s. In fact, he often took more turns than some of the American students. Additionally, the data show that students who were relatively quiet in class can be seen in both groups, American and international students. However, the data also reveal that there was a difference in the participation patterns between the two groups. The percentages for turn taking were more evenly distributed among the American students than among focal participants.

This background information about the level of participation among our participants sets the stage for addressing the research questions that have framed this study.

#### ***How much does their cultural background influence the seminar experience?***

A common misconception might be that all students coming from the same culture or country might have the same experiences in the classroom. Our findings suggest that there were in fact significant differences



among students from the same country or culture and even within the same discipline in terms of their classroom experiences. For example, two students who had finished their master's degrees in China had different classroom experiences. Meiling said, "We didn't do [presentations] in China." But Ping said, "In seminar [in China], one student will do the presentation."

Wu, as noted earlier, was one of the most talkative students in the classroom. However, in the interview he said he never talked in class in China. This was partly because he scored lower on his entrance exam than his classmates and because he believed that the other students talked more and the instructors liked them more than they liked Wu because of those scores. However, his experience in the U.S. was very different: Before I don't think the teacher would like me, and I didn't feel proud of myself sitting there in class, either. . . . Now I think, first I am interested in the topics, also I feel the readings were very high quality and filled with information, but I don't really learn a lot. So if I have questions, and I don't ask, then I would be missing a lot of information. So if I have questions, I would ask.

Wu came the realization that speaking up in class was the only way to find answers to his questions, which consequently kept him from remaining silent in class. The interviews with Wu also revealed that the instructor's approach to the class also made a difference. He described his instructor in the following manner: "I think she is fairer, too . . . Anybody can ask questions, and every question is addressed."

In addition to the difference of the work required of the students, the expectation of the level of discourse in the classroom also varied. For example, Sook said, "In the class [in Korea], we all just focus and talk about the readings. We never talk about 'my dog' or 'my cat.'" However, Yun described one of her classes in Korea as filled with personal stories.

Despite these differences, there was a common acceptance among the participants concerning the importance of classroom discussion. Contrary to what earlier studies indicated that international students do not think learning occur in discussion format, our participants genuinely embraced the discussion format in class, even those who had never had such an experience. They were aware of the fact that they were in a different country whose culture(s) were different from their own. They expected the differences and perceived them as an opportunity for experiencing a different way of learning. For example, Ping noted:

I think we, Chinese, may sometimes think that American like to show off, but to American, it's just a self-expression, no big deal. I think that when you come to this country, you need to respect their customs. You yourself sometimes need to make adjustments in your thinking.

Additionally, students noted that classroom discussions provided opportunities for social interaction. Meiling, for example, added:

At the same time, the social skills, just try to express yourself and your idea. . . . You learn how to express yourself. That's very similar to the social occasions, where you try to express your ideas. There are some similarities.

Classroom discussions were also appreciated by the students as an opportunity to develop independent thinking and a different way of learning. Ping said:

There are some topics or stuff doesn't fit lecture format, I think. These are topics that are better learned through negotiation. During this process of negotiation, students are more aware of the development of the knowledge and would learn better.

The participants revealed time and again that they saw themselves as learning content knowledge through classroom discussion and valued the experience of having discussion in class. They also perceived the discussion in a class as a social event, during which they were learning to interact with people in their

respective fields. They knew their classmates could be their colleagues in the future, so they felt they needed to learn to express their ideas and discuss them with the rest of the class.

These data suggest that the level of participation of these international students is not based on their cultural background. As we have demonstrated, students from the same culture had varying experiences in their home countries, and our participants anticipated having different experiences in going abroad to study.

### ***How do international graduate students navigate through seminar discussions with limited language proficiency?***

In understanding international students' experience in classroom preparation, we found that some had great difficulty with the language. Their scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) were between 600 and 650, except for two students who scored around 500. The students whose TOEFL scores were around 500 had significant difficulty with the assigned readings. One of these two students' proficiency in English was so limited that she was unable to answer many of the questions in the oral interview and completed the questionnaire only after it was translated into her first language. The other student noted that it took a very long time to complete many of the readings and that she sometimes could not understand the readings. Asked if she was interested in the topic discussed in class, she replied, "Actually I didn't read [the] whole thing. So I don't know [if] I am interested in this topic or not."

However, we found that despite the apparent linguistic proficiency of the other students based on their TOEFL scores, several struggled to understand all the required readings before class. On the questionnaire administered to the focal participants, the students revealed that sometimes they understood certain required readings perfectly and other times they felt they only somewhat understood certain readings, while the American students generally rated them as "very well understood." The international students' struggle to keep up with outside classroom preparation led them to read the required texts two or three times in order to understand them. Some of them also utilized other strategies to prepare for classroom discussion, such as highlighting key points in the article, writing summaries, reading supplementary materials (sometimes in their native language), and discussing the readings with someone else in the class, usually with another speaker of their first language. They also often wrote their comments and practiced how to deliver the comments before class.

Problems with English proficiency also affected their engagement in class. The two with the lowest TOEFL scores (around 500) did not participate voluntarily in class throughout the entire semester. However, each participated one time during the entire semester to answer an obligatory question when specifically called upon by the instructor; their answers required only phrasal response, rather than a complete sentence. They were simply unable to follow the discussion taking place in the graduate class. Those who scored 600 or above on the TOEFL were able to follow the discussion in class and spoke up in class from time to time. Additionally, students who did not understand the readings very well and could not understand the discussion well often appeared to be disengaged from discussion. We observed signs, such as not making eye contact with the students who were talking for a long period of time, as well as not having appropriate facial expression when the class was engaged in heated discussions or jokes. In addition to these signs, proficiency issues were corroborated by the participants in the interviews. In fact, all of the focal participants reported that sometimes they were unable to follow the discussion because of their inability to comprehend the conversation. At times, lack of engagement was a conscious decision made for a particular reason. For example, Sook said, "Sometimes this is because I purposely don't want to listen carefully, because I want to think about the ideas that are forming in my head at that time." The focal

students needed time to contemplate what they wanted to say in class; consequently, they had to choose a time to withdraw from the conversation so they could participate later.

A significant and common problem of these international students' English language was noted in the researchers' observation notes. These students often had a hard time making their intentions clear to the rest of the class. This observation was also confirmed by some of their classmates. For example, Matt said: Wu has really excellent English, but he tends to keep talking. Either he hasn't gotten to the point yet, or he has said the point three times.

Rose also commented: I don't think it is a problem with the pronunciation, it is just how to phrase things. You have to really listen for the content of the question instead of what is actually being said.

The following example illustrates how Elle, an American student, struggled to understand Yun's interaction with an instructor. Elle's reaction was captured during an interview within 24 hours after the class session. Elle and the researcher reviewed the recording of this class session during her interview. Her thoughts, which she told the researcher during her interview, are in parentheses:

Yun: On number, on page eight, at the bottom (We were looking at page 37 of Chapter 3, in particular, paragraph 17 . . . At the time, I did not look at the page I was on, assuming that she was referring to something that we were just talking about. . . )

Dr .E: Number 17 or number. . . (Dr. E was assuming, as I did, that she is referring to something on the page we were talking about.)

Yun: Just the bottom page. . .

Dr. E: Uh huh.

Yun: Fourteen is more informative than number. . . 14A.

Dr. E: 14A (At this point, I am starting to get confused because there is no 14A on the page we were looking at before the female student started to make her inquiry.)

Yun: I couldn't understand why. (Why? Why What? . . . She was not giving me

enough information for me to figure out what it is that she is talking about.)

As one can see from Elle's reflection in the parentheses, as an American student in the classroom, she was having great difficulty understanding Yun's intention. It was not a language problem on the surface level such as grammar or pronunciation, but a problem with language on a deeper level, expressing effectively the intent of the meaning.

What is expected in a classroom discussion is the use of words to connect what is being said to what one is about to say. Wu demonstrated his struggle with this issue several times. He changed the topic of the discussion without transition. As the class was discussing Topic A, Wu interjected, "I have a quick question." And when the instructor acknowledged him by saying, "Yeah?" he asked his question which was not at all related to Topic A. By comparison, when an American student wanted to ask a similar off-topic question, he or she generally would prepare the audience by saying something like, "Sorry, this is not related, but I have a quick question. . . ." Otherwise, the question would have seemed too abrupt and odd to the rest of the class members.

The focal international students often assumed that their American colleagues could understand the underlying intention of their comments. For example, out of the blue, May abruptly changed the classroom discussion with "On page 49 . . ." when typically it is expected that a lead-in comment would preface a



change in topic, such as: "I have a related question, but can we turn to page 49 first before I ask my question?"

Nonetheless, the American students were appreciative, to a certain degree, of the focal participants and could relate to the difficulty of speaking a second language. For example, Ali stated:

It has been exciting for me because I learn so much from engaging in a conversation about their culture and what they prioritize and stuff. I have never really had a problem with it.

Erika said:

Sometimes I wonder how, um, these people who can barely make up a sentence in English that you can really understand. How they get along here? How do they read all this hard stuff. . . . Sometimes they ask a question I am not sure, I kind of think maybe it's the language thing.

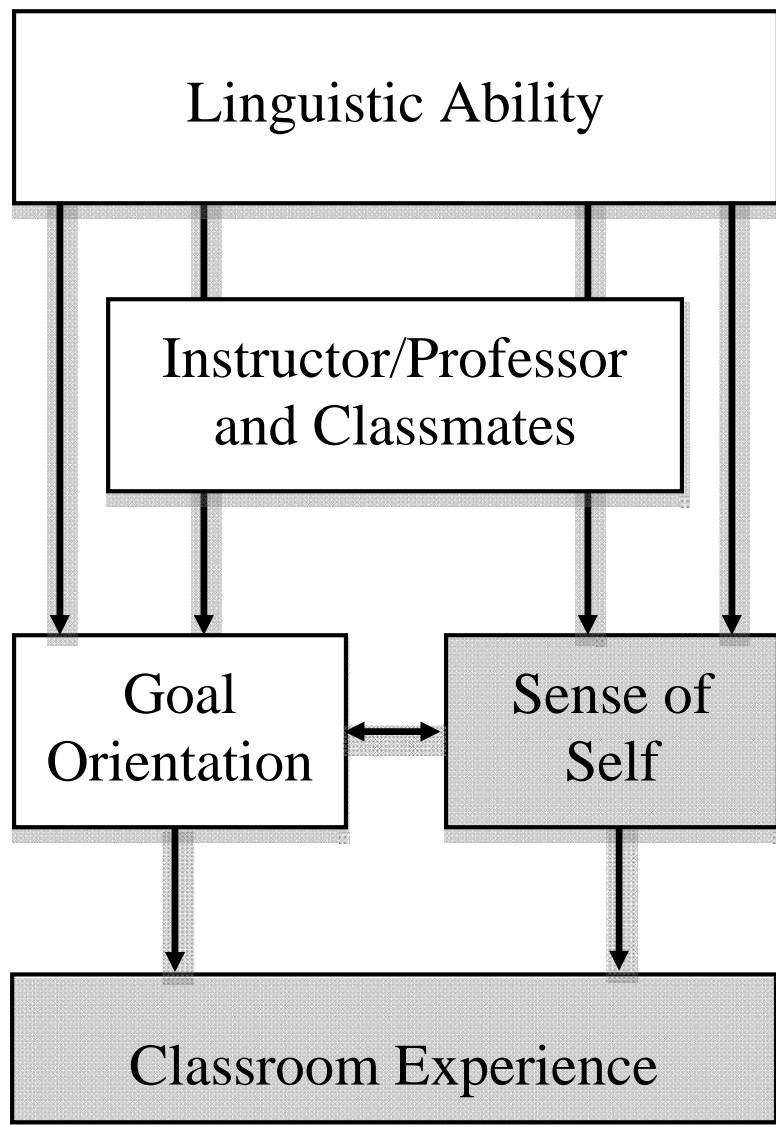
Despite the supportive nature of most of the American students, Joanne expressed hesitation about being sympathetic about the focal participants who had not yet said anything in her class. She said:

I understand, but I also wonder that. Somebody told me once that they [international students] use that to their advantage . . . even if she understands the conversation, but [she] doesn't feel like participating, if I thought I could get away with that, just acting like [I cannot speak up because it is my second language], I would do it, so . . . I am always kind of curious. . . . I think they probably do get away with not saying anything. . . . I always worry that I sound stupid, but I'd rather sound stupid than sit there wishing something interesting would happen, you know.

Even though the American students were in general relatively supportive of their international classmates, there was significant difficulty in understanding the intent of their comments or questions. Our analysis revealed that many international students lacked the linguistic knowledge that would enable them to transition from one topic to another in classroom discussions and to clarify the purpose of their comments.

#### ***What are the factors that influence international students' participation in seminar discussions?***

Several themes emerged from our data that are related to the participatory experience of international students. We found the following factors to be significant influences on the learners' engagement, their difficulty in speaking and their concerns about speaking in the classroom. First, the international students' instructors and classmates served as contextual agents affecting their engagement in class discussions and overall learning process. Second, individuals' sense of self and goal orientation, along with their linguistic ability, interacted with the contextual agents, which also influenced how international students responded to the classroom experience. From these findings, we developed a model that illustrates the relationship between each of the themes that emerged from the study (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Model of International Students' Classroom Experience.**

As we described in addressing our second research question regarding limited language proficiency, there is no denying that issues with language were a significant aspect of the learning experience for international students, which is why we placed it first in our model. All of the focal participants reported they were sometimes unable to follow classroom discussions because they were not able to understand a conversation. Comments such as “It was hard for me to keep up with the discussion.

... The major factor I think was language” were repeated by each of the focal participants.

The inability to comprehend the conversation by and large led to negative results in class. In particular, when students could not understand the discussion well, they often felt they were not a part of it. That feeling consequently affected their sense of self and their goal orientation. For those who attempted to understand the conversation, it was a tiring process. For example, Meiling described her experience in the classroom: “Sometimes I asked a very simple question, but they cannot understand me” (linguistic ability).

“That makes me feel embarrassed” (sense of self). Meiling’s description revealed how her limited linguistic ability affected her sense of self, which in turn affected her classroom experience, in that she made the decision to limit her participation in the classroom.

Ping described his thoughts after speaking up in class:

I thought it might be good to talk to the class (goal orientation). But while I was talking about the story, I kept concerning about my English. (linguistic ability) But after that moment, I thought it should be better than not to say anything to say something with my poor English. (Classroom experience)

As this illustrates, Ping’s goal was to contribute to the classroom discussion. However, his concerns with linguistic ability resulted in his changing his goal orientation from speaking in class to choosing not to speak in class.

The relationship between goal orientation and sense of self is also interactive, which is seen in the two-way arrow between these themes in the model. This interaction is illustrated by two participants’ experiences, which they described in their interviews:

Wu: I didn’t ask questions to them because I thought the questions may be too easy. Plus the rest of the people understand them apparently since everyone laugh. So I didn’t ask.

Sook: I hesitated to ask a question for a moment, but shortly decided not to because everybody but me looked like they did not have any problem in understanding Dr. E’s comment. . . . I didn’t want to be the focus of attention and to reveal my lack of understanding by asking a question about what nobody seemed to have problem in understanding.

Each student had a question about a comment in class. After they saw that no one else had a problem or question, they started to doubt themselves and were convinced that asking their questions would only reveal their ignorance. These situations exemplify the notion that goal orientation and sense of self are often intertwined and affect classroom experiences.

The second important theme of our model addresses the role of instructors and classmates of international graduate students, especially their effect on the students’ goal orientation and sense of self, which in turn influence their classroom experiences. The literature has focused primarily on international students’ linguistic ability and cultural differences and has examined the experience of the international student as an internal, individual experience rather than as a contextual, interactive experience. Our data show that the contextual factors, such as instructors and classmates, have prominent roles as international students navigate seminar discussion.

As our earlier discussion has shown, the focal participants were often concerned with their linguistic ability, self-image and ability to participate in the classroom discussion. However, if the classmates seemed friendly and open-minded, these concerns were usually diminished. A student who spoke up in class a few times depicted her classmates in this way:

Most of the students are very polite. They try to talk to you very politely. I never feel uncomfortable from the discussions. They are all very nice. If you don’t know somebody, when you disagree with him or her, [there] may be some uncomfortable [feelings]. But if we know them well, that will not be the case.

However, the opposite is also true: If classmates were not very encouraging, that would have a negative effect on the international student’s desire to speak up in class:

Sometimes I do notice when one international student, for example, a Korean, talks about the Korean or ESL something like that, the Americans look so bored. I really feel discouraged from that.

Instructors also had significant influence on the classroom experience of international students. From the very first day, students attempted to understand the instructors and to discern what instructors wanted

them to do or would allow them to do (goal orientation) and to understand their role as students in the classroom (sense of self).

There were several common instructors' characteristics that encouraged discussion, according to the focal participants. The first characteristic that emerged from the data is that it is important that the instructors appear to the student to be knowledgeable, as Sook explained:

I think when she talks or when she answers students' questions, the way she speaks facilitates students' learning and understanding. Her explanation is very effective to me usually.

The second characteristic that emerged was that it was important for the instructors to be sensitive to students' needs and to make conscious efforts to be inclusive of the international students' contributions. The following comments illustrate the importance of this characteristic of their instructor.

Meiling: She told us how to organize your paper, print out your presentations. In other general class, I never learned that. . . . She gave us two papers about how to do presentation, and that paper also talked about how to communicate with your audience. It was very helpful.

Yun: She would try to find ways to include your comments in the discussion, so you feel you are included. Last, the instructors' genuine interest in and acceptance of the international students' comments was also a very important characteristic. Ping, in particular, appreciated this characteristic of his instructor:

She didn't say this is right or this is not right. She just try to lead you think. Let you think. Let you speak up . . . not put something in your head. . . . Students can argue with her, she doesn't mind. When I talk in class, she understands what I said. It's not just "OK, I hear you." She values my opinions . . . even if what he or she said is something I don't agree or understand, if the professor was serious, I would continue and ask more questions politely, like ' No, I mean this, that's why I think this.' But I just gave up.

In common with classmates' feedback and reactions to the international students' classroom contributions, instructors' characteristics gave students the feeling that they could learn from the discussion led by the instructor and a sense that their comments, even their mistakes, were valuable to the instructor. Instructors and classmates have a unique role in their interaction with international students; they have the potential of serving as mediators between the international students' linguistic ability and the influence that linguistic ability has on goal orientation, sense of self, and ultimately the classroom experience. Our model illustrates this potential with a box in the middle showing the instructors' and classmates' direct influence on goal orientation and sense of self. The model also shows that linguistic ability can directly affect goal orientation and sense of self. Given the potential effect that instructors can have, these data revealed to us that it is crucial for instructors to help students feel secure about making mistakes, especially students who think they are going to say something imperfectly, such as these international students.

### **Discussion**

Overall, the data have shown that the participatory experience for international students is dynamic, dependent not only on the individual's abilities and situation but also on the classroom setting. It is a process that is constructed moment by moment in response to the context. The focal participants seemed to assiduously attempt to figure out what was going on in class, when they could talk, the classroom role they had assumed or believe they should have assumed, and the quality of their learning. Many of their decisions were based on the images reflected through the eyes of their instructors and classmates, who often served as mirrors in the graduate seminar experience.

In contrast to the findings of many previous studies on international students (see Johnson, 1997; Liberman, 1994; Tam et al., 2009), our results indicated that culture is not an important factor influencing international students' experience in classroom discussions. Even though the international students in our

study had different experiences regarding classroom discussions, there was a common acceptance among the participants of the importance of classroom discussion. They realized that they were in a different cultural setting and genuinely embraced the different format of learning in class, even those who had no previous discussion experiences.

The international students exhibited a growing awareness of cultural differences about how to navigate a graduate seminar, and they realized that major adjustments could be achieved in a short period of time. Nevertheless, it is important not to minimize the complexity of the process. Our data, like the findings of other studies (see Brown, 2008; Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Kim, 2006), found that many international students experience language limitations in all areas (speaking, listening, writing, and reading), making it very taxing for them to participate in oral discussions. The language obstacle even occurred prior to class, when a few students had difficulty understanding the required readings. Our analysis also indicated that international students often lacked the ability to use effective connecting words to form cohesion between sentences and the ability to successfully convey the illocutionary meaning of an utterance. Consequently, American students were sometimes unable to grasp the intention of focal students' statement or to follow their line of reasoning.

Our data have explicitly described the relationships among between instructors, classmates and the classroom experience of the international students. The existing literature on this topic has failed to capture this relationship. Our model fills this gap in the literature by explaining the influence of classroom context on the experience of international graduate students. Our findings are consistent with Hsieh's (2007) argument that one should not attribute the silence of international students only to their cultural backgrounds or personalities but that other factors may have a role in perpetuating this silence.

Programs designed to help meet the needs of international graduate students should include training that will help increase their knowledge about American classroom culture, especially in seminar courses. In addition, universities need to establish effective means of providing international students with the appropriate resources to develop not only their academic language skill but also their practical communicative ability in English. Specifically, there is a need for university language programs to effectively prepare international students for classroom discussion, including appropriate discourse style, and experiences that enhance their sense of self. Furthermore, American instructors and students should be informed of the experiences of international students given that they are significant contextual factors in their lives. This is particularly important given that intercultural communication is a two-way street influencing all those involved.

As with any qualitative study, the findings we presented may have overstated or understated certain perspectives of the participants' experience. Furthermore, one must be careful to avoid overgeneralizing findings to other populations, because of the selectivity of the study. Another challenge in carrying out this study was that all interviews were conducted in English, in which some of the participants were unable to fully convey their thoughts and ideas. Consequently, some valuable information about their experiences may have been overlooked. However, in order to address some of these limitations, member checking afforded us the ability to capture the major themes in the participants' experiences.

Given that the present data point to the participatory process as an evolving experience, a comparative study addressing these issues between American and international students' experiences would extend our understanding. Additionally, this study has focused on the experiences of Asian students. Future studies should consider the differences that may exist between Americans and international students from other Western and Eastern cultures. Our findings suggest that interventions are needed to address the



challenges of the international graduate student. Future research is needed to study the effectiveness of such interventions.

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