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“I can’t ... I won’t?”: International students at the threshold of social interaction

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Abstract

This mixed-method study tracked social interaction and adaptation among 20 international postgraduates on a one-year programme in the UK, examining assumptions that language proficiency and interactional engagement directly underpin sociocultural adaptation. Participants remained frustrated by a perceived ‘threshold’ barring successful interaction with English speakers, while reporting reluctance to take up available opportunities, independent of language proficiency and sociocultural adaptation. We challenge linear models of adaptation and call for assistance to international students in crossing the threshold to successful interaction.

Keywords

Year abroad, international students, sociocultural adaptation, social ties, language proficiency, motivation, sojourners

Background

Sociocultural and psychological adaptation to international study settings has been widely explored in view of the growing global phenomenon of international education (in the context of higher education often termed “academic sojourn” (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). In the last three decades, the number of international students in higher education (HE), who enrol “outside of the country where they have received their prior education” (UNESCO,

2010) has risen from 0.8 million in 1975 to 3.7 million in 2009, with an increase of 77% since 2000 alone (OECD, 2011). This number is projected to grow to eight million by the year 2020 (Forest and Altbach, 2006). For many universities, recruiting international students is a central plank of their mission for success as research and teaching institutions on the world stage and, less overtly, a good financial investment for continued viability. In the UK alone in 2010/11, international student enrolment stood at 16% for the total student body and at 70% for full-time taught postgraduate degrees (UKCISA, 2012).

In the case of students with English as a second language (L2) who want to come to English-speaking settings, various factors such as the internationalisation of labour markets and increased mobility of students from rapidly growing economies play a central role in the surge of these numbers (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007; OECD, 2010). The phenomenon is widespread across the Anglophone world but, given the limits of space, we focus here on the specific context of the L2 English student market in the UK.

The benefits to students of their own potential transformation through such international sojourns are claimed in linguistic, intercultural and wider terms. Graduate Prospects, a UK government-supported website recruiting students to the UK, suggests that coming to the UK is a chance “to perfect your English” (Graduate Prospects, 2012). Studies of global student experiences highlight the advantages for personal and career development of developing successful intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Spencer-Oatey, 2010). Such advantages are also assumed to be associated with high levels of instrumental or extrinsic motivation for international students, particularly in achieving the high levels of language proficiency needed to successfully accomplish their international studies (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009).

However, the connections between language proficiency, intercultural competence and motivation are complex, and the specific impact on sociocultural adaptation and

interactional engagement of these specific internal factors is hard to identify. So it becomes a circular question to try and analyse, for example, whether proficiency or motivation would be the cause or effect of interaction. Moreover, the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motives for adaptation and interaction can become conflicted, with tension between expected and actual levels of achievement, when reality does not match with a learner's "ideal" L2 self (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009). This tension can also be identified with self-perceptions of the value of communicative competence, which is often perceived as translating into a lack of willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yu and Shen, 2012). These tensions create barriers to interaction, leaving students sometimes frustrated and feeling they have not made the most of their academic sojourn (Wright, 2012).

Given the evidence of tension between expectations and reality in psycho-social terms, what factors are seen to foster sociocultural adaptation on the one hand, and interactional engagement on the other? One factor seems to lie in ties with host nationals such as home students or local residents, which has been found to have a clear positive effect on the experiences of international students, including overall sojourn satisfaction and academic achievement (Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward and Masgoret, 2004), levels of stress (Redmond and Bunyi, 1993), language development (Furnham and Erdmann, 1995; Gareis, Merkin and Goldman, 2011), and communicative competence (Furnham and Alibhai, 1985; Morgan and Arasaratnam, 2003). Gareis (2000: 67) goes as far as to state that "the area of intercultural contact with possibly the most significant impact on the future of international relations is the interaction of foreign and native students on the world's campuses".

For a variety of reasons, however, the reality for many students at the threshold of their sojourn once they arrive on campus is far from ideal, as many find difficult such interactions to help successful adaptation. A lack of integration between international students and members of the host society remains a recurrent theme (e.g. Hechanova-

Alampay et al., 2002; Parks and Raymond, 2004; UKCOSA, 2004; Brown, 2009a; Marginson et al., 2010). Several authors have pointed to circumstances and contextual factors which might inhibit interactions with home students and the local community, including indifference on the part of the local host society (Montgomery, 2010). Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998: 705) claim that ‘The presence of a sufficient number of students from a common cultural background provides the potential of the formation of an ethnic community within the university’.

Another factor argued to affect adaptation is language proficiency. Several scholars have pointed to language proficiency as the essential lubricant easing the process of cultural and social adaptation (e.g. Senyshyn, Warford and Zhan, 2000; Schutz and Richards, 2003). Similarly, it has been claimed that lack of adequate English is one of the biggest barriers to international students’ success (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Andrade, 2006; Zhang and Mi, 2010), and a common source of anxiety (Brown, 2008; Brown and Holloway, 2008). However, as noted earlier, cause and effect are hard to tease apart, and research on the impact of language proficiency on sociocultural adaptation is largely inconclusive (Gareis et al., 2011). In particular, it is not clear how students’ own perceptions of themselves as successful global students (Spencer-Oatey, 2010), transformed by their experiences (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Brown, 2009b), are affected by linguistic proficiency, and if their perceptions change in response to interactions during their academic sojourn. For example, in Ward and Masgoret’s (2004) study on international students in New Zealand, students felt that their lack of English ability inhibited the formation of ties with host nationals on or off campus; it was found that students with higher English proficiency had more contact with members of the host society. Sias et al. (2008), in contrast, found no significant relationship between language proficiency and cross-cultural friendship formation. Other studies suggest

that linguistic fluency alone does not guarantee host national contact (Ward and Kennedy, 1999; Brown, 2009a). Further inhibiting factors may include cultural distance, academic workload, student sojourners' commitment to forming ties with host nationals, and lack of interest on the part of the latter to befriend international students (Yang et al., 1994; Alreshoud and Koeske, 1997). However, many of these studies are cross-sectional and cannot improve our understanding of how students face the challenge of coping with their new academic and social environment, and how they adapt over time.

A recent project explored these issues in a longitudinal study of language change during a one-year academic sojourn in the UK (Wright, 2010, 2012). This study on L2 English question formation found that, for the majority of the sample of 44 Asian Masters-level students, language proficiency scores did not significantly change during a year's exposure. Wright (2012) also examined a subgroup of 19 participants in order to track quantitative changes in opportunities for interaction. Speaking in a range of social settings on and off campus was reported at an average of one hour per day, though with wide individual variation. These differences were not correlated with improvements in language proficiency, and many students reported great dissatisfaction that their expectations of improving English, especially spoken English, were unmet. Yet the wide range in language use seemed to indicate marked discrepancies in students' drive to seek out opportunities to use and improve their English - this suggested that student willingness to interact was not as robust as might be expected, and merited further investigation.

In view of the complexity of the factors involved in understanding interactional engagement, we have focused here on testing the specific assumption that greater sociocultural adaptation fosters interactional engagement but that different contexts, such as academic versus informal settings, may have different effects on levels of interaction and degree of adaptation. Much of the research on higher education international students is

characterised by large-scale quantitative surveys and few studies have looked in detail at one particular aspect of the international student experience (Montgomery, 2010). Our study seeks to address this gap by providing an in-depth investigation of a small group of twenty international students, undertaking a one-year taught master's degree at a single university. For the purpose of analysis of participant interactions, we refer interchangeably to 'international students' or 'non-native speakers'. We also refer interchangeably to 'host nationals' (student or non-student local residents) and 'native-speakers' (Carroll and Ryan, 2005); in the case of this study these terms refer to the UK and English native speakers. We acknowledge the potential inappropriateness of the non-native/native speaker terminology within different academic perspectives but, for ease of reference, we use it here in a descriptive sense, echoing participants' own use of the terms to distinguish themselves from both home students and local residents.

We aimed to explore the connection between sociocultural adaptation and interactions using English in a variety of settings on and off campus, and the students' perceptions of challenges and opportunities encountered in these interactions. Our research questions were:

1. Are there identifiable differences for international students in interaction in academic and informal settings, and in interaction with native and non-native speakers?
2. What do international students identify as common barriers and opportunities for interaction?
3. How far do international students perceive language proficiency specifically as a barrier?
4. What are international students' perceptions of their interactions?
5. Do these perceptions change over time?

6. Do international students express evidence of positive sociocultural adaptation over time in line with levels of interaction?

Method, Setting and Participants

The chosen setting for this study was a university in the North East of England offering postgraduate degrees in Applied Linguistics and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) which traditionally attract high numbers of international students (usually around 90% of the total cohort). These students have achieved a minimum language proficiency of 6.5 IELTS or equivalent. Students from a specific yearly intake were invited to participate in the project; keeping participation limited to one programme was intended to maximise the homogeneity of the group in terms of teaching interaction, academic expectations and motivation for being in the UK. For both aspects of the study participation was voluntary, with no impact on academic record; anonymity was guaranteed and participants knew they could withdraw from the study at any point. To avoid any overload or stress, participants were invited to join in both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study, but were free to fulfil only one element of the data collection. Twenty participants were originally recruited at the start of the study, although not all provided data in either task at both times of data collection (detailed further below). Participant drop-out is always a risk in longitudinal studies, and we acknowledge the limitations from the small numbers and from some differences in participants in each aspect of the study. Nevertheless, we present the qualitative and quantitative data as representative data which we believe will answer the overarching questions of the study.

Data were collected at two points: one month after the start of the students' academic programme (up to 3 months after arrival for some who had participated in pre-programme language courses: Time 1) and eight months later (Time 2). Time 1 took place early in the

academic year in order to capture a snapshot of the participants' experiences in the initial sojourn stage, characterised by the need to adapt both to a new sociocultural environment and to an unfamiliar academic system (Brown and Holloway, 2008). Time 2 took place towards the end of the programme of study, when the students had had enough time to experience plenty of opportunities for interactions and build social ties on and off campus.

Quantitative data were collected in order to provide a context for the qualitative exploration reported below and to answer the first research question. Participants were asked to fill in a self-reported diary of hours of interaction in different settings over a typical week, requested at Time 1 and again at Time 2. The journal differentiated between type (listening and speaking), context (informal or off-campus, and academic), and interlocutors (host society residents, termed here native speakers (ns) and other international students: non-native speakers (nns)). Participants were free to determine what constituted informal or academic context, but typically lectures, seminars, preparing classwork and interacting with lecturers or other students in class time were counted as academic, while informal interaction included normal living such as shopping, arranging mobile phone contracts, and building social ties through church, voluntary work or other social activities. Eighteen participants provided diary data at the start of the study, and twelve of these also provided comparison diary data at the end of the study. The data are coded and analysed using non-parametric inferential analysis within SPSS, as is usual in small non-normally distributed samples (Larsen-Hall 2010). The totals are reported here as the average number of hours per day when participants were using English, for ease of comparison across the various contexts and times of data collection.

Qualitative data intended to answer the principal research questions were collected using semi-structured interviews, each lasting about 30 minutes, conducted in parallel to the quantitative data collection at Time 1 and Time 2. The aim of such data for this study was to

illuminate the quantitative findings from the participants' diary reports, and to provide the kind of in-depth access to student experiences that existing large-scale quantitative studies cannot easily capture. These interviews were held with seven pairs of international students recruited from the same cohort as reported above. Using pairs for interviews was intended to provide a quasi-naturalistic "conversational" setting, to stimulate rich qualitative data as well as reduce interviewee tension (Holliday 2007). It also allowed the interviewer to observe students' interactional style within the interview setting, and to contextualise and inform subsequent analysis of their responses by creating a dynamic open style of answer, in which a student could reinforce or contradict the other student. Eight of these students also provided quantitative data as described above. Interviewees were self-selected volunteers, and the sample was representative of the general composition of the student body in the department. One was male, the others were female. Two participants were from Saudi Arabia, one was from Turkey, and the remaining eleven were from either the People's Republic of China or Taiwan. Many studies have focused on groups of students from similar non-western backgrounds, such as China, but this mix of backgrounds allowed us to see the extent to which students from different countries had common or diverging interactional experiences.

All 14 interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The coding process involved careful scrutinising of each transcript for deductive comparisons of responses at Time 1 and Time 2 across the structured categories in the interview design. Each of the researchers then separately listened repeatedly to the audio recordings of the interviews, using an inductive approach, until more covert themes and recurring interpretative patterns began to emerge which were agreed on by both researchers (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010). A theme is understood here as "a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations, and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998: 161). Throughout the next section of

this article each theme is supported by verbatim quotations from the participants as a means of establishing a clear link between the raw data and the researchers' interpretative comments.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative diary data

We first evaluate the quantitative diary data to get information about the amount and type of interactions in different settings, to provide evidence of any changes between Time 1 and Time 2, and to provide a context for the students' responses in the qualitative interviews. The data differentiated between listening and speaking in informal or academic contexts and with native speakers (ns) or non-native speakers (nns). [See Table 1]

(Insert Table 1 about here)

In general, participants reported at Time 1 an average of around 4 hours' interaction per day (combining listening and speaking), across both informal and academic settings, but this changed by Time 2, due to a significant reduction in academic interactions between Time 1 and Time 2 ($p < .01$). Informal interaction remained above 4 hours at both times, but a small increase by time 2 was not significant. There was a wide range at both times, evident in the high standard deviations; at least 2 respondents reported 0 hours on one or more types of interaction (one reported a maximum of just over 5 hours).

To see how interactions reflected differences in listening or speaking, and native or non-native interactions, the data were further analysed to show these distinctions (Table 2).

(Insert Table 2 about here)

At Time 1, interactional engagement through listening and speaking were clearly different: listening rates were higher than speaking. In informal settings, these were not

significantly different according to native or non-native context. However, academic listening to native speakers was significantly greater than academic listening to non-native speakers ($p < .05$); academic speaking to non-native speakers was significantly greater than academic speaking to native speakers ($p < .01$).

Turning to Time 2, eight months after the initial data collection, we can see from Table 3 that the marked reduction in academic interaction indicated in Table 1 was primarily found in reduced hours' listening to native speakers. However, unlike at Time 1, at Time 2 no significant differences were found between listening and speaking in either ns/nns contexts or informal/ academic settings.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

The data taken overall indicate that participants' interactions were heavily skewed towards listening rather than speaking, and that most speaking occurred with other non-native speakers. In academic contexts, listening to academic native-speakers decreased significantly over time, and academic speaking was lower than listening at both times, perhaps reflecting the reality of a lecture-biased study programme where teaching had finished by the second time of data collection. In academic contexts, speaking to native speakers was the lowest of all the measures, and changed least over the period, while speaking with non-native speakers was higher than native speakers at both times. This perhaps reflected the international bias of the whole programme cohort (around 10% home students). Informal interactions maintained a steady rate over the period, again with a clear bias towards listening to native speakers, and marginally more speaking with non-native speakers.

The clearest finding, however, is the low level of overall interaction, particularly in speaking, supporting the claims that international study is far from the immersive experience typically expected (Kinginger 2011), and that specific opportunities for interactions are

difficult to find (Montgomery 2010). The qualitative interview results seek to explore this in more depth and identify emerging possible reasons.

Qualitative interview data

The semi-structured interviews, conducted at Time 1 (early in the academic year), and repeated at Time 2 (eight months later), followed four main categories: expectations versus reality in using English; challenges in academic settings; challenges in informal settings; and evidence of friendship ties and socio-cultural adaptation after arrival (see Appendix). These categories allowed us to compare the participants' responses, and to track how these changed over time. We cross-referred participants' own perceptions of opportunities and barriers in different contexts with the evidence from the diary reports of low overall usage, especially in speaking. The open-ended discussions also enabled the students to comment freely on their experiences, expectations and perceptions, which we then re-analysed for emergent themes.

In general, comparing answers within the interview categories across the time scale, all participants revealed high (and as yet largely unmet) expectations of interactional success in terms of using English to their satisfaction, even by Time 2 – reflecting the low average daily interaction rates shown in the quantitative diary data above. Participants all felt that they had been successful in their home countries in using academic English, but were experiencing difficulty in real-world usage in the UK. They identified problems in achieving wider socio-cultural adaptation, especially in establishing friendship ties beyond their co-national groups.

Problems outside participants' control were clearly identified as external barriers to building successful interaction, largely in academic settings, arising through the structure of the course and the nature of the university-provided accommodation. Key external factors were the demands of a very time-demanding, lecture-based study programme with largely

unfamiliar content, in which most of the time was spent in individual reading. Also, same-country accommodation arrangements and skewed intake on the programme (80% Chinese) were identified as making interactions with English speakers (home or international) very difficult. Informal challenges also produced external barriers, largely through unfamiliarity with the kind of vocabulary and pragmatic competence required for everyday activities, such as opening a bank account, or setting up a mobile phone.

However, internal or socio-affective barriers were also clearly identified as affecting interaction, even when these might be in conflict with the external factors already identified. For example, participants expressed their expectation and desire to find home student friends, while admitting to feeling “lazy” about doing so. This conflict between expectation and action was also seen in preferences expressed for same-country company: for social, cultural and psychological reasons, even at time 2. As one participant put it:

We share the same culture, maybe we have the same habits, so it's very convenient and very comfortable to live together. (Chinese student)

Another participant acknowledged that:

For the purpose of ... developing ... English I want to live with ... British people or ... foreigners ... but about lifestyle I prefer Chinese people. (Chinese student)

These comments indicated to us that participants felt caught at some kind of “threshold”, between wanting to interact more but not managing to do so, of being aware of the chances to interact but not taking them. In our secondary inductive analysis we explored further what

barriers might create this tension between choices and capacity to act on them, particularly in terms of linguistic or sociocultural factors.

In terms of language proficiency, listening was a major problem at first, although this was not specifically linguistically constrained but rather to do with unfamiliar content. One participant admitted to understanding as little as 20% to 30% of lectures at the start of the programme, although this improved by the end of the programme:

When I have done the pre-reading and have some prior knowledge in my head I can understand maybe sixty to eighty now [percentage of lecture]. (Chinese student)

Most identified specific difficulty off-campus at first, in understanding local accents and coping with the speed of local speech and use of slang. This did improve over time, particularly in predictable contexts such as ordering a taxi or food in a restaurant. There was pleasure by Time 2 in the improvements in pragmatic or contextual understanding of everyday speech. Participants mentioned being able to use shorter, more natural sentences in restaurants or shops “like native level” and with growing familiarity in what to say:

I feel nervous ... when I communicate with the ... people in the bank ... but after that, I think it's ... not difficult as I expected. (Chinese student)

I'm not afraid to speak English to native speakers. (Chinese student)

Speaking however, even at Time 2, remained a challenge (reflecting the overall distribution of speaking as the lowest average number of hours in the diary data). Most of the participants admitted that they were frustrated by their lack of improvement in both academic and informal contexts. They avoided speaking to their lecturers, preferring email:

I think it is ... not that easy ... sometimes I feel I ... cannot express my ...
question easily ... sometimes my tutor cannot understand what ... is ... my
question.

(Chinese student)

Participants also tended to avoid everyday interactions, such as going to shops, and using the telephone remained a high barrier.

On the telephone it's really difficult to communicate because ... I can't see
their expression, or gesture or something, so I prefer ... person-to-person to
communicate. (Taiwanese student)

In general participants emphasised lack of opportunities for speaking, and socio-cultural rather than linguistic barriers, as the most common difficulties in establishing social ties and feeling able to interact. These barriers seemed to outweigh the contradictory desire to improve interactional engagement and also suggested, among these participants at least, the perception that chances to initiate interaction were out of their control.

University responsibility for intake and accommodation was clearly identified as problematic, especially for the Chinese students, leaving them expressing a sense of helplessness over how to overcome the problem:

It's not that I don't want to, but I can't – no time, always studying, studying.

(Saudi student)

In our group ... we are all Chinese; I feel I just study in China. (Chinese student)

I think it's the school's responsibility ... they have to choose students from different parts of the country. (Chinese student)

I thought I could speak English all day when I study in UK, but it's totally different to what I thought because everything just out of control. (Taiwanese student)

Even where interaction was possible, problems still emerged, with some evidence of perceived cultural distance. In informal settings participants reported that, even in mixed accommodation, they tended to separate into their own country groupings:

We try to meet with other students but I think there are maybe some difference between Eastern country and Western countries ... maybe there are cultural differences there. (Chinese student)

There is some kind of culture differences here ... we cannot find very common topics to talk. (Chinese student)

In academic settings, and group work in particular, it was often seen as quicker and easier to revert to the participants' mother tongue (L1), e.g. to express complex ideas, if group members were all from the same country:

We share the same first language and if we just use English to communicate it sometimes is very difficult to explain some complex things, so we also use the L1. (Chinese student)

Another topic that emerged on and off campus was a sense of intimidation in managing successful interactions, including difficulty in expressing ideas, nervousness in initiating topics, and high expectations of needing to speak fluently:

In the classes I have had chance to communicate with foreign students but sometimes I find it difficult ... to express some ideas. (Chinese student)

Although, I think I have had opportunities to [talk to] them ..., sometimes I just sit silently with them, and I was thinking very hard to find a topic but I just can't find a one to chat with them very fluently, so, that's the problem.

(Chinese student)

There was also a perceived lack of initiative in building relationships from home nationals, especially fellow students, who were found to be very helpful for one participant but, more commonly, were felt to be uninvolved, and over-dominant in classroom discussions:

I was expecting to see many British people speaking the Queen's English and who would voluntarily help me improve my Queen's English. (Turkish student)

And even the students here, they are not so friendly or offering help. (Saudi student)

Especially when the native students ... ask some questions or they express some opinions ... they have a really good question and I just ... maybe we have good questions but ... we can't put them into words ... even when we put them into words we just can't have the ... courage to say. (2 Saudi students)

In response to this difficulty in receiving support from home students, participants expressed the need to retreat to the safety and support of co-national social links:

Sometimes I feel comfortable and cosy with my Chinese friends because we can talk to each other in a very free environment, I think. (Chinese student)

Chinese people we have the same lifestyles...some behaviour is also the same, so we can take care of each other. (Chinese student)

The expression of externalised difficulties also reflected two deeper emergent themes reflecting what we perceived to be a lack of self-agency or a reluctance to feel responsible for overcoming these problems. The first theme emerged in expressions that interaction in English was seen as an external obligation, supported by others, rather than an intrinsic goal:

I have to speak in English ... we should be well prepared. (Chinese student)

I talk to someone ... but he will not ... correct my word so I have ... no chance to ... change my word. (Chinese student)

We know we have to use English a lot, but just forget about that. (Chinese student)

Another emergent theme was reluctance to take the initiative on seeking interaction. This was put down to a variety of external reasons, including lack of opportunity and the weather:

We need some native speakers ... to speak with. (Chinese student)

I got little time; I have no friends to practice English with me. (Chinese student)

I really want ... to have some British friends ... but maybe because we don't mix with other people ... and also the weather ... it doesn't allow us to go out and socialise.

(2 Saudi Arabian students)

However, beyond these externalised expressions of a bar against interactions, internal factors were also directly identified by participants as affecting their capacity to interact, suggesting they were indeed aware of the tension between their admitted desires and expectations, and the reality of what they actually chose to do.

Maybe it's we don't have many chance to talk, to speak, or because of our own personality. (Chinese student)

When I first came here I thought this is England so I would be with British people all the time and would practise English a lot ... in linguistic terms maybe because of my being lazy ... not covering my expectations. (Turkish student)

We often say we have a lot of Chinese students, we don't have...opportunity to speak with each other, but I think it is only an excuse ... if we want to practise our English, we can speak to native speakers but sometimes we are lazy ... we lost ... a lot of opportunities. Maybe when we go back to China we will regret. (Chinese student)

We identify these themes as reflecting a broader reluctance to engage, not due to specific linguistic limitations or socio-affective factors, but as arising out of a deeper, unexpressed, sense of being caught at a threshold of engagement, a sense of conflict between capacity and choice over interaction. We see this resulting in an awareness of opportunities to interact which are not always taken up:

I just most of the time keep silent rather than saying my opinions. I just think in my mind and keep it to myself. (Turkish student)

I just can't find a one [topic] to chat with them very fluently ... what they know and what I know they don't match together for social interaction. (Chinese student)

I feel that I improved but at the same time I think that maybe there was a chance to improve more. (Saudi student)

We also identify a sense of on-going sociocultural distance, resulting in a resistance to feeling integrated, which is symbolised by references to homesickness, and continuing references to locals as “foreigner”:

When we are here when everyone is speaking English ... you feel homesick all the time ... so we need to ... listen to something ... Arabic something from your own country. It is not a matter of that Arabic is easier ... it is a matter of ... maybe identity. (Saudi student)

It is another point about the culture ... maybe I can talk with some foreigner about the weather, or the food and I could not ... force myself to tell you a secret to tell you my private life. (Chinese student)

And communicating with the foreigners, I find it's harder to explain your ... sometimes ... harder to explain your ideas. (Chinese student)

Conclusion

The overwhelming impression, from this in-depth study of opportunity and effect of interaction in a typical one-year international study programme in a UK university, is that participants have very low average hours of listening and speaking on and off campus throughout the year. The reports of limited hours of interaction closely reflect participants' sense of frustration in failing to achieve successful interactions, even after eleven months or

more of residence, although cause and effect are hard to tease apart. Some improvements are seen in predictable contexts – lectures and seminars become easier to follow, and less intimidating to participate in, once the content and interactive style becomes more familiar. Managing off campus in shops or restaurants, watching films, ordering taxis, and managing negotiations in banks and with mobile phone companies become largely unproblematic over time. Nevertheless, participants still identify that speaking, in particular, remains challenging, and that interaction with host country nationals is commonly avoided both on and off campus.

External barriers to interaction clearly emerge, including heavy work demands of an intensive one-year study programme, placement in same-country accommodation, and an intake which, in the university studied here, is very skewed towards Chinese-speaking students. Socio-affective or internal barriers are also clearly identified, including a sense of strong sociocultural isolation from host country nationals (and to some extent, other international students), and a perceived sense of reluctance emanating from home students to initiate interaction. This sense of isolation was often projected in cultural terms, especially in not knowing “what to talk about” because of coming from a different “culture”. This seemed to result in a preference for co-national interactions on and off campus, despite clear expressions of high motivation and desire to improve interactions with other English speakers. Lack of adequate English is not specifically identified as a barrier (counter to Andrade, 2006), after early stages of becoming familiar with the pragmatic demands of fast natural speech and unfamiliar contexts such as handling new academic content or managing bank accounts.

We claim that limited hours’ interaction is the effect rather than the cause of participants’ lack of interactional engagement. We argue that participants’ expressions of external and internal barriers reflect a sense of being caught at a threshold, in conflict

between their capacity and choice to interact. We suggest that in certain cases, such as intensive one-year Masters' programmes in the UK, the combination of external and internal barriers, even for proficient and motivated students, may be just too high to cross without greater support.

We acknowledge the very small sample size reported on here, and the limitations on how far we can draw generalisations from our data. However, we conclude that sociocultural adaptation is not always the linear and transformational experience that has been found elsewhere (e.g. Brown and Holloway, 2008), particularly on one-year intensive study programmes. Instead we suggest it remains dynamic and highly individually varied around a threshold of conflict between choice and capacity to adapt. We note that models of L2 identity and motivation from outside the sociocultural framework such as Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) model of the "Current L2 Self" and the "Ideal L2 Self" can provide a helpful context to understand this sense of conflict. We also conclude that the construct of the proactive, self-initiated "global student" (Spencer-Oatey, 2010) with interactional competence, founded on linguistic, intercultural and socio-pragmatic proficiency (Byram 1997) is very hard to achieve, based on lack of evidence for the emergence of such competence in our data. We also suggest there may be greater individual variation along the sociocultural transformational path than is commonly recognised, and differing degrees of awareness of self-agency within the development of interactional competence in international settings, which deserves further investigation. We call for a holistic integration of psychological studies of motivation, linguistic studies of interactional competence, and sociocultural studies of international student adaptation, to construct a reliable and informative framework of the international student experience, which will better inform universities and students of the realities and challenges involved in studying abroad.

We finish on a practical note, urging stakeholders responsible for the international student experience to be pro-active in responding to the challenges identified here (Wright, 2012). We urge greater on-going constructive support and training for international students before and throughout their period of study, to help them manage as successfully as possible to cross the threshold to successful international study. Students should be encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to speak with and interact with members of the local English-speaking community even before arrival for their academic sojourn. If not many English speakers are available locally, universities could construct web-based communities (e.g., using resources such as university pre-arrival online chat rooms, or recruiting a group of informal online mediators adapting the innovative ‘Skype Granny’ scheme – Mitra & Dangwal, 2010, Mitra 2012). During the sojourn, existing schemes in many universities to provide a broader involvement for international students should be encouraged within and beyond the academic programme, such as using mixed-language study groups for credit-bearing work, setting up native-speaker ‘buddy’ links with international students, ensuring international students are actively engaged in university social or sporting programmes, or informally encouraging students to pair up with English-speaking roommates in order to boost much-needed opportunities for interaction in and outside the classroom. Students currently frustrated with the barriers they face will feel more supported by the evidence that their hosts understand the scale of what is involved in crossing the threshold to successful interaction.

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Biography

Clare Wright lectures and researches in second language acquisition and TESOL at Newcastle University, UK. She completed her PhD on individual differences in L2 English development in international students, studying under Vivian Cook and Martha Young-Scholten at Newcastle. Her current focus of interest is in changes in oral proficiency during immersion studies abroad in L2 English and L2 Mandarin.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. What's your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. How old were you when you started learning English?
4. How many years have you been learning English? Any break since leaving school?
5. So far, have you had any language problems or difficulties in the university lectures and classes here?
 - a. When in lectures?
 - b. When reading books and journals?
 - c. When involved in group discussions?
6. Any issues in other university contexts?
 - a. Communicating with academics outside of classroom (i.e. by email or before/after classes)?
 - b. Dealing with administrative staff?
7. Tell about your living situation here:
 - a. Where do you live?
 - b. Who do you live with?
 - c. Which languages are used in your home here?
8. Tell me about your friends here in the UK:
 - a. Do you have many friends from your course, from other courses at university, from outside uni?
 - b. Where are these friends from (i.e. all international students, or some local people)?
 - c. What language(s) is/are used with these friends?
9. Can you tell about other interactions you have here, apart from the ones talked about, where you have to speak English (for example, in shops and restaurants, etc.)?

10. Can you tell about other interactions you have here, apart from the ones talked about, where you choose to speak English (for example, in language clubs/societies, etc.)?
11. Do you watch much TV, movies or listen to music here? What kinds?
12. How often, and in what ways, did you use English before arriving here?
 - a. In classes?
 - b. With friends?
 - c. Other time and places?
13. Tell me about your expectations before coming here.
 - a. Is the English you hear as you expected?
 - b. Did you expect so much variation?
14. Do you feel that you are using English as much as you expected to, or less, or more?

Table 1: Mean daily average (hours) of interactions in informal and academic settings at Time 1 and Time 2

	Mean hrs, Time 1 (n=18)	Mean hrs, Time 2 (n=12)
Average informal	4.25 (<i>SD</i> 2.82)	4.68 (<i>SD</i> 2.72)
Average academic	3.78 (<i>SD</i> 2.68)	1.96 (<i>SD</i> 1.53)

Table 2: Listening and speaking daily average (hours) – Time 1 (N=18)

	Mean	Std. Dev	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Informal settings</i>				
Listening ns	1.76	1.40	.43	5.29
Listening nns	1.01	1.26	.00	5.29
Speaking ns	.63	.78	.00	3.29
Speaking nns	.86	.59	.00	2.00
<i>Academic settings</i>				
Listening (academic) ns	1.57	1.15	.43	5.00
Listening (academic) nns	.94	.68	.00	2.50
Speaking (academic) ns	.42	.58	.00	2.00
Speaking (academic) nns	.87	.78	.14	3.00

Table 3: Listening and speaking daily average (hours) – Time 2 (n=12)

	Mean	Std. Dev	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Informal settings</i>				
Listening ns time2	2.10	1.71	.07	5.00
Listening nns time2	1.02	1.53	.00	5.14
Speaking ns time2	.75	.81	.00	3.14
Speaking nns time2	.82	.93	.00	3.29
<i>Academic settings</i>				
Listening (academic) ns time2	.72	.73	.00	2.14
Listening (academic) nns time2	.53	.57	.00	2.00
Speaking (academic) ns time2	.28	.41	.00	1.43
Speaking (academic) nns time2	.43	.40	.00	1.00