

# International Students in Higher Education: Language, Identity, and Experience From a Holistic Perspective

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# BOOK REVIEW

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND EXPERIENCE FROM A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Tavares, V. (2021). *International Students in Higher Education: Language, Identity, and Experience From a Holistic Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. Pages: 217. Price: CDN 123.65 (hardcover).

Applying a holistic and critical framework, Vander Tavares explores the lived experiences of four multilingual international students at a Canadian university (Pond University—a pseudonym for an actual Canadian university) regarding their second language acquisition (SLA), identity construction, and lived experience in the host community. Tavares emphasizes the significance of holistically understanding a student's overall experience because each individual student has a unique experience, undergone to different degrees, at different times, with different goals and expectations.

This book consists of nine chapters. In chapter one, Tavares indicates that international students' experiences are neglected at the "human" level because the current internationalization context emphasizes how international students benefit institutions through "reputation, branding, and revenue" (p. 11). Additionally, he challenges the prevailing discourse of viewing multilingual international students as those with linguistic and academic deficits.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on international students' rationales for studying in Canada, the benefits and challenges of studying in Canada, and their experiences, including academic, social, belonging and integration.

Chapter 3 builds the theoretical foundation of this study. Tavares outlines a holistic framework that explains multilingualism at the individual and societal levels, constructs identity from post-structuralist, social psychology, and cultural perspectives, and views second language acquisition (SLA) from a sociocognitive approach.

Chapter 4 explores the contextual features of the institution's community, because identity development is shaped within the context of the university. This chapter also discusses community members' experiences and perspectives of multilingual international students, multiculturalism, and multilingualism, including the perspectives of domestic students, faculty, and support staff. Despite the community members' acknowledgement of the crucial contributions international students make to Pond, they argued that multilingual international students face challenges in terms of intergroup interaction, academic language proficiency, and "implicit structural racism" (p. 68). Opportunities to engage in intergroup interaction are also considered necessary by all four students. However, the four international students also feel that it is difficult or almost impossible to interact and make friends with domestic students, who are generally considered by the four students as being uninterested and unavailable for such experiences. However, the domestic students attribute this problem to the lack of meditation from the university. Tavares notes that the disconnect between international and domestic students stems from their different desires in four dimensions of experience: "social, cultural, emotional, and linguistic" (p. 192). Furthermore, housing and campus location may play an essential role in determining whether international students can interact with students from different backgrounds and foster a sense of connection and belonging. Therefore, all the stakeholders (faculty, staff, students, institution) should reach an agreement to facilitate the connection and relationship be-

tween domestic and international students.

The following four chapters (Chapters 5-8) present rich portraits of four multilingual international students' experiences. Although the four students have different backgrounds, personal expectations, and goals and are at different stages of their programs, they encounter similar challenges centred on the linguistic and social aspects of their experiences. For example, they all felt frustrated with intergroup and intragroup interactions and commented on experiencing a superficial kind of multiculturalism and a monoculturally-oriented curriculum within the classroom. However, each individual demonstrated resilience and resistance, and endeavoured to construct their identities, get proficient in a second language, and work towards their goals.

The final chapter summarizes the book and provides recommendations to the institution and related community members, and suggestions for future research. As each student's journey is unique, the institution should ensure that the support concerning social, cultural, linguistic, and academic adjustment, integration, and success is congruent with students' unique needs. Based on the challenges the four students typically encountered, the findings of this study indicate that more comprehensive language support and a new approach to testing language proficiency (instead of the current standardized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL) are needed.

Additionally, more attention should be paid to internationalizing the curriculum and pedagogy. The curriculum should not be superficially globalized in content; instead, it should demonstrate appreciation for cultural differences and be "educationally inclusive and ethical" (p. 194). Meanwhile, the internationalization of pedagogy should consider and integrate international practices and perspectives on ways of learning, in order to improve international students' classroom experience.

Upon finishing this book, one point that appeals to me is that Tavares challenges and critiques the previous discourse of international students being "in deficit" by stating that dividing and differentiating domestic and international students into superficially distinct groups is problematic, as it imposes negative stereotypes on international students and causes "implicit structural racism" (p. 68). Although Pond University shows appreciation for and representation of multiculturalism, institutional practices reflect a dominant Anglocentric perspective. Negative stereotypes can affect the quality of multilingual international students' academic experience, their sense of belonging, and their men-

tal health. Furthermore, implicit structural racism is reflected in many aspects of institutional support systems, which may treat international students as deficient and needing to be fixed. Tavares further stresses that a genuine appreciation for cultural differences by the local community, and viewing international students from ethical and humanistic perspectives are necessary to create a more inclusive environment for international students, human development, and cross-cultural exchange.

Overall, this book provides rich narratives of four international students' lived experiences at Pond University, specifically the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity development and language acquisition experiences. Theoretically, it enriches our knowledge of post-structuralist, social, and cultural theories of identity and sociocognitive approaches for meaningful second language acquisition. If you are interested in learning about international students' experiences in Canadian universities, read this book because it provides rich narratives of four international students' lived experiences. If you are a multilingual international student struggling with identity formation, second language acquisition, and finding a sense of belonging, this book is for you because you will resonate with at least one of the four stories and realize you are not alone.

Perhaps you are a faculty or staff member who wants to understand international students' perspectives and thereby contribute to the curriculum and pedagogy development and support structure. In that case, this book may provide some insight for you. Furthermore, if your research is related to international students' experiences, you can find much related literature and a number of theories in this book. Last but not least, if you want to help build and maintain a diverse community for international students, this book will guide you to take the first step.