International Student Security and English Language Proficiency

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Abstract

“International student security” refers to the international student’s maintenance of a stable capacity for self-determining human agency. The article focuses on the role of English-language proficiency in the security of students from English as Foreign Language countries, drawing on evidence from a program of semistructured interviews with 200 international students. The interviews show that language proficiency is a pervasive factor in the human security of the international students in all domains inside and outside the classroom. There is a strong link between language proficiency and the capacity for active human agency. Both findings confirm prior research literature. The article concludes with implications for practice and for further research.

Keywords

international students, language proficiency, English, human security, social protection, globalization

Introduction

Each year, three million students or 2% of the world’s tertiary students cross national borders when accessing tertiary education. Cross-border students are growing at double the rate of local (domestic) students. Half of the cross-border students are from Asian
countries. More than 45% of all cross-border students enter the Anglophone countries. There is close overlap between these two groups (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2010). Many cross-border students are from countries where English is not the language of daily communication (English as a Foreign Language, EFL countries), including most of East and Southeast Asia. For these students, proficiency in English can be as valuable as the completion of degree or diploma.

The United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand provide cross-border education on a commercial basis to augment revenues. The resulting incentive to increase the supply of places, and the growth of the middle classes in China, India, and other countries, have generated rapid expansion. In Australia, the number of on-shore cross-border students (hereafter “international students”) in higher education rose from 25,000 in 1990 to 202,448 in 2007. Twenty-one percent of students in Australian institutions were international students, the highest level of any economically advanced nation (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; OECD, 2010). Four in five of these international students were Asian, most of them from EFL countries. The fuller implications of international student growth are still emerging and are much debated. For example, issues related to English-language proficiency, communications, and language standards are the subject of recurring discussion and controversy, often making media headlines (Birrell, 2006; Lane, 2007).

The Article

This article is part of a larger study focused on factors contributing to the human security of international students, especially the lacunae in their security. The main report was published as International Student Security (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). This article expands on one aspect—the impact on student security of language proficiency, communicative competence, and problems in communication, in all domains in which the students are active. The article largely focuses on English-language proficiency and communications in relation to the human security of students from EFL countries. Empirical data are drawn from semistructured interviews with 200 international students in Australia.

The article begins by outlining a definition of “international student security,” which provides the normative framework of inquiry. It briefly reviews the international and Australian literature concerning the implications of international student language and then summarizes and discusses the findings in relation to English language proficiency and the interfaces between language proficiency and active student agency. The final section discusses implications for educational practice and further research, and the limits of the study.

International Student Security

Between 2003 and 2008, the authors conducted empirical inquiries into the human security of international students in Australia and New Zealand. Data collection was
financed by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. This work has generated *International Student Security* (Marginson et al., 2010) and other articles (for example, Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2005; Sawir, 2005; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2009; Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Ramia, Sawir, & Smith, 2009; Nyland & Forbes-Mewett, 2010).

In this program *human security* is defined as “maintenance of a stable capacity for self-determining human agency” (Marginson et al., 2010, p. 60). Human security has two aspects, encompassing on one hand the protection of persons, on the other hand their capacity to act. This notion extends beyond a subsistence, protective, or welfare model of person, and beyond the notion of consumer in a market, to envision the person as an active self-determining agent, albeit subject to the external conditions of life. It embraces both negative freedoms and positive freedoms. This concept of human security draws partly on the work of Sen (1985, 2000) on freedom and capability. It also extends ideas about the human security of the globally mobile developed by agencies of the United Nations. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994) formalizes human security as “protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life; whether in homes, jobs or in communities”; and “safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression” (p. 23). This encompasses security in relation to food, health, personal safety, and the political economic order. However, it suggests active human agency only in relation to economic sustenance. Mobile refugees are modelled as persons needing protection alone with little focus on proactivity. In contrast, our definition imagines mobile students as active agents and bearers of full human rights (United Nations, 2010). This is consistent with the widely understood mission of higher education as forming self-actualising individuals.

“Security” in this sense is manifest in all domains of student life. The study gathered data in relation to personal safety, freedom from discrimination and abuse, consumer information, financial viability, safety at work, housing, health and welfare services, personal and social networks, relations with public and university authorities, and cross-cultural relations on campus and outside. One specific focus was students’ competence in and confidence with the use of the English language. Language proficiency was assumed to be a keystone attribute that affects human security in all domains. This assumption about the role of language proficiency was grounded in the literature on international students, concerning the relationship between language proficiency and human agency. That work is outlined in the next part of this article. Once human security is defined to encompass active agency, and it is assumed that there are mutual relationships between language proficiency and active human agency, language proficiency becomes relevant to human security in all domains. For EFL learners, facing communication difficulties in the country of education, the centrality of language proficiency is obvious. It is much discussed in the research literature, as will now be considered.
Research on International Students and English Language Proficiency

Two strands of research are relevant to this inquiry: studies of relations between language proficiency and academic learning, and studies of language proficiency and communicative capacity in relation to adjustment, acculturation, and cross-cultural relations. Some investigations in the second group examine relations between language proficiency and active human agency.

Language Proficiency and Academic Learning

In a number of studies, international students identify language proficiency as the most problematic aspect of academic learning (for example, Lee, 1997; Lin & Yi, 1997; Nasrin, 2001). Difficulties are manifest in listening and oral communication, lack of knowledge of local contextual references, inadequate vocabulary, and the struggles to meet the requirements for academic writing. The student testimony is replicated in interviews with academic staff in one American institution conducted by Trice (2003). Faculty noted that TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores were not a reliable guide to competence in English (Trice, 2003, p. 394).

Some UK studies discuss institutional responses to student learning difficulties related to language proficiency. Language-support services have a limited impact in the face of student learning problems on a large scale (Cownie & Addison, 1996). As learning is shaped by disciplinary knowledge (Spack, 1997) and cultural conditions, including prior learning, wholly generic foundation language programs and support services cannot address all problems of academic English. Furthermore, generic services are rarely varied for the cultural backgrounds of students, but people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds organize discourse differently (Gonzalez, Chen, & Sanchez, 2001; Wilkinson & Kavan, 2003; Zhu, 2004), and have varied classroom politeness regimes. Academic language-support services need to be better resourced and nuanced to different learning habits.

Australian studies of international students’ academic achievement suggest that an interplay of factors shape academic success, including personal qualities, cultural background, previous education, language proficiency, teaching, and support (Carroll, 2005; Feast, 2002). English proficiency is the factor most often mentioned in research findings, especially by students themselves (for example, Gatfield, Barker, & Graham, 1999; Malcolm & McGregor, 1995). Research on language-related learning difficulties as seen by students and/or faculty finds that English as second language (ESL) and EFL students frequently experience serious language-related difficulties in their academic work (for example, Daroesman, Looi, & Butler, 2005; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Pantelides, 1999; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Singh, 2005).

In Australian research, like the research from the United States and United Kingdom, the most frequently cited language-related learning problems in order are writing and then oral comprehension and communication (Robertson et al., 2000;
Sawir et al. (2005). Hellstén and Prescott (2004) note that language-related difficulties impose time pressures: study and assignment preparation takes long time, lectures are recorded and replayed, and conversation in English is slowed by mental translation. Some students have problems with the Australian accent and cultural references, which differ from the English they had acquired prior to coming to Australia (Singh, 2005).

Some studies have focused on the contextual conditions that frame the learning site and students’ responses. Prescott and Hellstén (2005) note that prior learning shapes the transition to academic English (see also Sawir, 2005). Pantelides (1999) finds that some faculty were unaware of students’ cultural and educational backgrounds and the nature of their learning difficulties.

The study by Pantelides also corroborates the point made by Trice (2003) in relation to TOEFL testing. Most students entering Australia undertake an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test to determine English language proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Many universities set a minimum average IELTS level of 6.0 or 6.5 at entry. Both Pantelides (1999) and Carroll (2005) identify students who met the IELTS entry requirement but had poor academic English proficiency. Some studies find no statistically significant relationship, or a negative correlation, between IELTS and academic performance (for example, Dooey, 1999). Nevertheless, other studies indicate a positive relationship between English proficiency as measured by IELTS and grade point averages (Elder, 1993; Feast, 2002; Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999; Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001). Kerstjens and Nery (2000) and Bayliss and Raymond (2004) find the IELTS reading subtest predicted academic performance. Yet international students starting with low measured proficiency can survive, acquire proficiency and succeed, if the learning setting is conducive (Asmar, 1999; Dooey, 1999; Stoynoff, 1997), which raises doubts about the use of IELTS to determine threshold educability.

Language Proficiency and Life Outside the Classroom

The research is consistent in finding that inadequate language proficiency hinders students outside the classroom, especially where cross-cultural communication is required. Proficiency in English affects psychological adjustment and the level of stress (Redmond, 2000; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Language difficulties isolate international students from local persons, including students (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Ippolito, 2007; Li & Kaye, 1998; Trice, 2003). Hayes and Lin (1994) find that English proficiency is “an important factor in social interaction and adjustment,” that “inability to speak the host language fluently is a primary inhibitor to becoming socially involved in the host society”; and “to fill the void” some international students “form strong in-group oriented ethnic communities” (pp. 8-11).

Research on stereotyping, segregation, and discrimination affecting international students highlights the centrality of ease in, and commonality of, communication (for example, Lee & Rice, 2007). Communication barriers, including accent, are strong
triggers of stereotyping behaviours by local nationals (see the study of cross-cultural stereotyping by Spencer-Rodgers, 2001).

Few Australian studies have focused on the role of language proficiency in international student adjustment and cross-cultural relations. Prescott and Hellstén (2005) find that language proficiency is a vital factor in the transition to living in Australia, and Singh (2005) finds it essential to work. It also affects the capacity of international students to integrate socially with locals (Daroesman et al., 2005) including local students (Singh, 2005). International students who have spoken some English when growing up tend to have higher connectedness, lower cultural stress, more satisfaction with living arrangements, and greater involvement in paid work, when compared with other international students. Those without English knowledge from their childhood often restrict themselves socially to same-culture peers (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006, p. 89).

Language Proficiency and Agency

One line of inquiry points to an interdependency between host language proficiency and the self-determining agency of students. In these studies, communicative competence in the host language both mediates and interacts with contact with host-country nationals. Each factor, communicative competence and integration with host-country nationals, augments self-confidence (for example, Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006, p. 491). This has a cyclical effect. Self-confidence facilitates more local encounters, which furthers language development and so on. This virtuous circle also tends to increase prospects of academic success.

In a study of 81, non-Western, international students in Canada, Yang and colleagues hypothesized that frequent intercultural contact contributes to student adaptation and the link is mediated by English language self-confidence. They find a sense of self-determining agency (“independent self-construal”) predicts English self-confidence. Conversely, “communicative competence in the host language directly promotes better well-being, perhaps because the language provides a vehicle of self-expression and identity negotiation”; and “given that comfort using the language of the host society facilitates the fulfillment of everyday needs, self-confidence was associated with better ability to carry out everyday tasks” (Yang et al., 2006, pp. 501-502). Strong agency helps students to acquire language proficiency and communicate. Language proficiency helps to sustain and augment agency. Language proficiency does not guarantee effective agency, but it helps.

Other studies also identify reciprocity between language proficiency and agency in cross-cultural contexts. These studies highlight various notions or aspects of agency, but all emphasise self-determination. Li and Gasser (2005) refer to “cross-cultural self-efficacy,” Hullett and Witte (2001) analyse “uncertainty control,” and Matsumoto, LeRoux, Bernhard, and Gray (2004) focus explicitly on agency in social interaction. These studies suggest that language proficiency and self-worth become linked in a
virtuous circle with positive local interactions (and the minimization of discrimina-
tion), contributing to a sense of belonging and the confidence to act. For example, 
Perrucci and Hu (1995) find that “academic satisfaction is most strongly related to 
contact with US students, language skills, and perceived discrimination”; while “social 
satisfaction is linked with marital status, language skills, perceived discrimination and 
contact with US students” (p. 491).

The Study
As noted, the purpose of the study was to investigate the human security of interna-
tional students in Australia and lacunae in their security, inside and outside the educa-
tional setting. The 200 semistructured interviews (99 men, 101 women) were 
conducted on a one-to-one basis for 30 to 60 minutes with students enrolled in at least 
their second semester. Interviews took place at nine public universities located in 
Sydney, Melbourne, and provincial cities in the States of Victoria and Queensland. 
Interviews were voluntary and arranged through e-mails advertising the study or via 
university international offices.

The interview group of 200 was too small to structure a representative sample. 
However, in most respects the interviewee group approximated the source population, 
international students in Australian higher education (Department of Education, 
Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009): 51% of the study population was 
female, compared with 47% of the 2005 source population; 86% of the study popula-
tion was from Asia, compared with 80% of the source population. Students from 
Indonesia (especially), Sri Lanka, and Pakistan were overrepresented in the study and 
students from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia were underrepresented. 
Arts, science, and education students were somewhat overrepresented whereas busi-
ness studies students were underrepresented. The study group was least representative 
in terms of age: 53% of interviewees were above 25 years of age and 23% were in PhD 
programs, much higher than the source population. It is reasonable to assume the aver-
age language proficiency of interviewees bettered the source population.

The interview schedule consisted of stem questions on topics pertaining to human 
security, clustered as (a) pre-departure assumptions; (b) living arrangements; (c) finances 
and work; (d) language and language use; (e) networks, organizations, and support sys-
tems; (f) dealing with authorities; (g) cross-cultural relations; and (h) personal risk and 
social protection. In the manner of semistructured interviews, the researcher asked stem 
questions on each topic and followed with impromptu questions in areas of promising 
inquiry. Though only one domain explicitly focused on language and communications, 
these issues arose also in answers to other questions, especially (e) and (g).

The quotations below were drawn from about 600,000 words of transcript. They are 
not inconsistent with the answers of most students interviewed. For each quotation, 
there are several if not many similar quotes from other students.
Findings on Language Proficiency and Communication Issues

The article now summarizes the main findings concerning language proficiency and communication. In order, it provides an overall summary of the findings, particularly variation by national background in the incidence of problems; findings on the relationship between language proficiency and academic learning, including preparatory and support services; findings on the relationship between language proficiency and student life outside the classroom; and findings concerning the relationship between language proficiency and student agency.

General Findings

Issues of language proficiency, communicative competence, and problems in and through communication were a primary topic in about one third of the 200 interviews, and received some discussion in two thirds of interviews. When asked “When you first decided to study in Australia, at the time, was there anything that worried you about this?” language proficiency was the most cited issue. Comments like “my English is not good enough,” and “you have to speak English all the time and it’s very challenging,” were common. The sense of linguistic hazard was compounded by loneliness and isolation:

I don’t have any relatives like family or aunties or uncles living in Australia so I have to live on my own. This is the first time I leave home as well and I worry about my English and my study. (Female, 23 years, nursing, Hong Kong)

Interviewees were also asked, “Does English create difficulties for you in your academic work?” Almost one-third (60 students) replied “Yes.” The question was fecund, often starting a line of discussion that ranged beyond academic work to include communications in other domains. There was marked variation by national grouping. In South Asia, English is well established in education and often functions as a lingua franca. Only 4 of the 40 South Asian students said that they had difficulties with English in their academic work, none from India and Bangladesh.

No, not at all because in India our education was in English, I was brought up in an English environment, and my work was in English. English is a first language in India as well. I have no problem with English. (Male, 27 years, business, India)

However, English proficiency was an obstacle for many East Asian students. Nineteen out of 28 students from China reported difficulties and 9 of the 14 from other East Asian nations. Some students from other nationalities were sympathetic, pointing to the crucial effects of gaps in language proficiency:
A lot of people from the Republic of China (we all say PRC) have a lot of problems with spoken English. I really feel for them because they get despised so much by Australians. . . . They can’t even communicate well. Their written English has all grammatical mistakes. They can’t differentiate between “is” and “are.” Australians, the university in Australia, want to make money, they are profit-making . . . out of students that can’t even speak English . . . it just drags the whole educational level down, the standard down. They can’t even understand. They have no interest, they always stay in their own, the Chinese community . . . they just survive with Chinese newspapers, Chinese magazines, Chinese food, Chinese people all around. That’s all they do. I have a lot of Chinese friends. But they have major, severe difficulties in terms of language and, especially during presentations. . . . They say the language school is useless. Definitely useless . . . they say all I do is meet other people from China. (Female, 21 years, architecture, Malaysia)

They have to work so hard. The same thing which I come to know in one hour, it takes them ten hours. I really feel bad for them. . . . (Male 19, commerce, Pakistan)

Only 3 of 18 students from Malaysia and none from Singapore reported difficulties, but almost half the other Southeast Asian students did so, including 19 of 49 from Indonesia, and most from Thailand and Vietnam. EFL students with work experience in English had least difficulties. One Indonesian student worked as a freelance journalist in English at home and liked writing in English. Another, from France, had good English proficiency because she worked in an international company.

**Language Proficiency and Academic Learning**

The specific academic difficulties triggered by lack of English proficiency varied. As Table 1 shows, confirming Robertson et al. (2000) and others, problems with writing were cited most often, being mentioned by 52 interviewees, just over one quarter of the group. Writing was followed by problems in oral presentation/classroom participation (27), difficulties in oral comprehension including those triggered by the Australian accent (24), problems in keeping up with lectures (17), local colloquialisms (11), and teachers who spoke too fast (7).

**Writing difficulties.** East Asian students often mentioned writing problems. “My writing is terrible, I have a lot of problems, I need someone to help me with my writing,” was a typical comment, in this case, by a female student from Japan. Some students had difficulty in writing full sentences and linking them together. Others were troubled by grammar or struggled to express ideas and structure arguments. Many needed to translate material in English in and out of the native tongue.

Academic writing is very different from informal English writing. . . . If I want to make a sentence in English I just make it in Indonesian, and then translate it
into English. But then somebody who is a native speaker, when that person reads my writing they say oh, it’s not English it’s another kind of language. . . . (Female, 30 years, food science, Indonesia)

Unfamiliar academic practices were an extra barrier, for example, referencing conventions. The demands of academic writing were discipline specific. Students in engineering and computing faced less demands on their writing skills that, as a consequence, were often little developed.

Oral communication. Australian accents created problems for some students who had learned British or American English at home, often as taught by a Chinese or Indonesian or Sri Lankan teacher not a native speaker. Other localised aspects such as slang and cultural references contributed to difficulties in following lectures.

Because all my schooling right from my kindergarten to my post-graduation was completed in English I was comfortable with English even before coming here. It’s [difficulty] only with the accent, which is different from that of UK. (Female, 27 years, primary education, China)

The first time I came here, I was not used to the Australian accent. In South Korean we are exposed to American English. So my god, this is not English, what are they talking about? (Male, 25 years, computer science, Korea)

The speed of lecturers’ speech affected a small number of students ($n = 7$) but they expressed themselves strongly. One business student from China said “I find it pretty hard to understand. Sometimes the lecturers speak pretty quickly and don’t give you notes or anything.” Several students emphasized that lecturers should be aware they

Table 1. Areas of Language Difficulties Experienced by International Students in Academic Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Language Difficulty</th>
<th>Number of Students Reporting Area of Language Difficulty ($n = 200$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking in class</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral comprehension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher accent</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following lectures</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local slang/colloquialisms</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher speaking too fast</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary and technical terms</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Some students cited more than one area of language difficulty.
were teaching classes with varied English proficiency. “They regard us maybe as native English speakers” (Male, 31 years, community development, Indonesia).

Conversely, some were concerned about their own voice tones. One student, who was proficient in English with all her previous education in that language and an IELTS average of 7.5 without studying hard, was inhibited. “I have a problem. I have an inferiority complex . . . maybe people won’t like my accent. That’s why I never participate in a seminar” (Female, 25 years, media and communication, India).

Various factors combined with proficiency issues to trigger difficulties in oral presentation, including lack of experience of class presentations at home, feeling intimidated by native English speakers, and being shy and nervous.

In Brunei we don’t give presentations . . . I was just tongue tied when I got up. I didn’t know what to say. I was intimidated by these people staring at me. You’re just out of place. (Female, 35 years, ceramics, Brunei)

If I am prepared I can get very high marks, but without preparation it’s very hard for me to express my ideas, especially now in this semester most of our classmates are Aussie, yes. They talk very actively. We cannot find any opportunity to speak at all. (Female, 27 years, business, China)

Preparation for academic English. Students also discussed language factors in preparation for study in Australia. Some argued that the widespread emphasis on training for IELTS was misplaced:

I don’t think IELTS is sufficient. For your daily life it’s enough that you can communicate and understand someone. But for academic purposes it’s far from enough [for] how to organize your sentences, how to express your point of view very accurately. (Male, 26 years, IT, China)

It’s harder to improve the very general aspect of your language because . . . [preparation] is only focused on the test. (Female, 25 years, business & IT, China)

Another group of interviewees, of about the same size, said IELTS preparation had helped improve their writing. It was less effective in developing oral skills. It was often noted that home country schools and universities emphasized academic reading and writing more than oral competence, slowing adaptation to Australia.

The English course when I studied in the university is not suitable, because you have no opportunity to speak. The teacher always speaks Chinese while telling you how to learn English. (Male, 25, telecommunications, China)

Prior to commencement, some students had completed a bridging program in their home country and another in Australia. Mostly, the former was more useful. Several
noted that the Australian-based bridging program would have been more effective if integrated with the student’s field of study.

I did my English preparation in Jakarta. It was very good and very helpful for me and I think also for my friends as well. But the English preparation here seems to repeat so it is not very helpful. (Male, 36 years, Indonesian studies, Indonesia)

The [bridging] course is not sufficient. It’s true that we are taught academic writing skills. But sometimes it depends on the academic fields of the students. For example the way to argue in a certain field is different from other fields. The bridging course here in Australia should be specific to [the] student’s field. (Female, 40 years, education, Indonesia)

When discussing how to better spoken-language proficiency, interviewees emphasized predeparture foundations, and mixing with English speakers after arrival. Some suggested an introductory course in interpreting the Australian accent. Others advocated early mixing with native speakers.

Don’t mix with people from your own country. It’s not good for you [if you want] to improve your English. I’m lucky, when I came here there were no Chinese in my house. So in the first few months, I had no chance to practise my Chinese. It’s really good for me to improve quite quickly. And secondly, talk as much as you can. Go outside, look with your own eyes, don’t always stay inside. (Female, 26 years, pharmacology, China)

Language support during the period of study. There were many comments on the need for better language support. Existing services were mostly seen as insufficient to meet many, deep, and complex needs. The services were often underresourced relative to needs—many were rationed—and overly generic, given each student had a specific learning background, trajectory, and issues. One student had cheated to gain extra help:

The learning skill teachers tell you that you have to make an appointment. But the time is very short. So, like, you study two sentences and then finish. So it is not enough. I don’t have any place to go, it is hard, very hard. I had a problem with the learning skill teacher, she is so bad. One day I needed to finish my Masters thesis. I had to get that done. So I wanted to see them [in the learning skills unit]. But I had finished my time there. Each student is allowed to see the learning skills people two times, and I had finished already the two times, a long time ago. So I used my classmate’s name, Lyn [pseudonym] But Lyn didn’t go, I went. So she [in the learning skills unit] said “your name is Lyn?” I said yes, I pretended. [later]she said “what’s you name?” I forgot, I said my real name.
She said, it’s supposed to be Lyn how come you’re here? I said I was sorry and that Lyn said that she wanted to give it to me. Lyn wrote a letter. She [the teacher] said “I don’t care, it doesn’t mean anything, you need to go now because you are cheating.” I went back to my course coordinator, the course coordinator was angry and wanted to complain about her, but nothing happened. (Female, 33 years, education, China)

There were a smaller number of positive stories. Some students were given preparatory language classes or extra classes on an ongoing basis. Some had received extensive extra help on a one-to-one basis, from lecturers or supervisors.

**Language Proficiency and Life Outside the Classroom**

Interviewees were asked, “Are there significant barriers in making friends across cultures?” A majority (61%) said “yes.” Most saw the barriers as a compound of language proficiency and cultural difference. A strong finding of the study was that gaps in English-language proficiency contributed to a tendency for same-culture students to congregate together, especially outside class, which exacerbated separation between international students and local students (aside from same-culture locals such as local students from Chinese families). It was easier to relate to people with whom one had a common language. When you use English to communicate, somehow it’s hard to have very deep communication (Male, 41 years, information & technology, China).

Problems of language proficiency interacted with lack of local and topical knowledge to hinder interaction with locals. Even students with good academic English found some conversational nuances beyond their reach. People from different cultures discussed different topics and had varied senses of humour.

You don’t know their jokes. You don’t know why they are laughing. Their humour is different and you don’t know their culture, what they are talking about. Although you know every word, you don’t really understand the true meaning of the sentence. . . . (Female, 24 years, industrial relations, China)

Sometimes, if I want to talk to them, I don’t know what the topic of conversation should be. So we always talk about school stuff. (Female, 22 years, commerce, Malaysia)

At work. In all 64% of interviewees were working or had worked at some stage in Australia during the period of study. When asked “Have you ever experienced problems at work?” 1 in 5 said “yes.” The main problems related to discrimination which was often associated with language proficiency or accent. “At the beginning it’s difficult to deal with my strong accent and level of English even though I did my best. I survive, and in the meantime I improve my English” (Female, 26 years, business, Mexico).
Communications and prejudice. Interviewees were asked “Have you experienced hostility or prejudice while in Australia?” Fifty per cent of interviewees said “yes.” Mostly, such incidents occurred off-campus. Many interviewees who said “yes” linked the discussion of racism, discrimination, or stereotyping to issues of communication. There was a reciprocal relationship between discriminatory “Othering,” and communication barriers. Some students paid a severe price for limited English when it triggered discourtesy, a refusal to speak, or aggressive hostility. Others who were more proficient suffered from assumptions that they could not communicate, triggered by their appearance alone, or by a comprehensible but nonnative accent. Once the native speaker made a quick judgement that the student’s language proficiency was inadequate, he or she often showed indifference or disrespect.

When I went for treatment at the general clinic, they acted as though I would not understand English. In the referral letter they gave, it was stated that I might not be able to communicate properly, that I might have some language problems - would the doctor at the hospital please keep the explanation simple and straightforward. Which was very insulting. I mean, it’s my first language. (Female, 19 years, arts, India)

[It’s] not explicitly stated that we don’t like you because you speak English different. That’s not explicitly stated but it’s implied . . . Some people don’t make an effort to understand what you are saying when you speak with a different accent. It can be in a shop or it can even be in the university. Especially when your English is basic, they don’t make an effort to understand. It is like a prejudice, they are probably not aware but it is a racist prejudice that this person is not able to communicate with me . . . that is the assumption behind it. It sounds trivial but it’s actually very important when it happens systematically . . . it kind of puts you off. (Male, 28 years, sociology, Cyprus)

As the international students were trying hard to communicate, they felt native speakers should respect their efforts and make a reciprocal effort to reach understanding. They were repeatedly disappointed when this did not happen.

Language Proficiency and Agency

Interviewees commonly saw proficiency in English as a key to active agency. Proficiency enabled EFL students to move beyond the passivity often associated with international students. The assumption that Asian students are inherently passive was not endorsed by any interviewee in the study. Rather, it was noted that in many East and Southeast Asian classrooms there is less emphasis on discussion (see Sawir, 2005). This factor, combined with lack of fluency and confidence in English and a reluctance to expose communicative weaknesses, especially early in the stay, generates the behaviours often interpreted as “passive.”
When asked how future international students could better handle language proficiency, one interviewee focused on proactive learning:

Most importantly they [the international students] should try to be more outspoken, to be more active, because I notice that most of the time they’re usually silent and more passive. So I want them to be more active, to be more involved in what they are doing in class, and also to prepare their English as good as possible, like say by reading novels, or attending the conversation class. (Female, 20 years, commerce, Indonesia)

Language proficiency brought with it the capacity to integrate on a broader basis. In turn, social mixing fed back into language learning and confidence:

Mainly I would advise them to really actively learn English when here. If they don’t, then they are better to stay back in their home country. If you study in Australia the language is English. Many of my friends they just hang out with their own country-people so they hardly learn English at all. You need to actively join other clubs maybe and societies so you can make the most of your studies here, not just academic but also social life with the Australian people while you have a chance. (Male, 23 years, arts, Macau)

Discussion and Conclusions

A strong finding of the research is that issues of language proficiency and communication are ubiquitous in the international student experience. They are of much concern for EFL students, who face the most difficulties in communication.

The study confirms that English-language proficiency is a necessary condition of the human security of noncitizen students studying in an English-language country. Not only is English the medium of study but also the proficient communication enables the students to understand, cooperate, and exchange with all parties; to meet the regulatory and administrative requirements of governments and universities; to deal with financial institutions, the health sector, housing, and retail firms; to perform paid work involving direct dealings with local people; to maintain broad networks of friends and contacts; to navigate personal problems and crises effectively; to exercise the full rights of students and humans.

There is a close resemblance between the findings of this study concerning the role and importance of language and communications, and the bulk of the research cited above. Malcolm and McGregor (1995), Lee (1997), Lin and Yi (1997), Gatfield et al. (1999), and Nasrin (2001), identify language proficiency as primary in international student learning, as did respondents in the present study. According to Pantelides (1999), Robertson et al. (2000), Hellstén and Prescott (2004), Daroesman et al. (2005), and Singh (2005), ESL and EFL students in Australia frequently experience serious language-related difficulties in academic work. This is repeatedly confirmed in the present study. The findings highlight difficulties with writing, oral communication, and
comprehension, as do Robertson et al. (2000) and Singh (2005). The research literature is ambivalent about the value of IELTS test results as an indicator of academic educability. Likewise, the student interviewees were about equally divided on this point.

Interviewees made similar points to those of Cownie and Addison (1996) concerning the inadequacy of university-provided support services. However, the data from the 200 interviews were insufficiently detailed in the disciplinary dimension of academic learning to test prior research findings that language-related services need to be nuanced by discipline (Gonzalez et al., 2001).

A strong finding of the study is that language proficiency and communication factors closely affect the potential for more than superficial relationships between international and local students; confirming Hayes and Lin (1994), Li and Kaye (1998), Trice (2003), Ippolito (2007), and others. Lee and Rice (2007) and Spencer-Rodgers (2001) draw attention to the interrelationships between language and communication difficulties and problems of stereotyping and discrimination, linkages corroborated by several interviewees in this study. At the same time, language and communication difficulties are not the master cause of all cross-cultural problems. Some discriminatory actions are triggered by appearance alone, prior to communication, as interviewees testified.

The study also confirms Yang et al. (2006), Li and Gasser (2005), and others who find that language proficiency correlates with proactive agency. Not all proficient persons were fully confident or active. Not every extroverted interviewee was fluent in English. But there was a clear overall pattern. Proficiency allows international students to respond to others, and to be self-determining on their own behalf. Human security is about the exercise of freedoms and the capacity to reach understanding so as to collaborate with others. Language proficiency is essential to both. The finding concerning agency is especially significant for international student security, defined as the stable capacity to exercise agency.

Language proficiency is not the “same” factor in every facet of student life. It gains significance in association with other factors (for example, academic requirements or cultural difference, and above all agency). These factors vary by the domain of action. Improving language proficiency is not the magic key that suddenly makes every doorway spring open to the international student. As so often with causal variables, it is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. Although an across-the-board advance in EFL students’ proficiency creates potential for better learning, other changes are needed to fully realize those potentials. A uniform improvement in communicative competence would not eliminate the possibility of discriminatory behaviour. Nevertheless, it would help to diminish such behaviour.

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative studies such as this have strengths and limitations. They do not provide a representative cohort: There is potential for selection effects. They do not identify correlations with precision. However, they are fertile in suggesting lines of inquiry for
more bounded and targeted quantitative (and qualitative) studies. For example, it
would be valuable to conduct research on the implications of language proficiency
that identified variations according to prior cultural background, educational forma-
tion, and discipline. Studies that track the different transitions from home-country
education to host-country education also could be fruitful.

A strength of qualitative studies is their capacity to highlight the relational and
nested character of variables. Regression-based quantitative analysis encounters dif-
ficulties in handling multi-dimensional relations. Despite advances in modelling, the
mathematization of large social domains is achieved only by abstracting out certain
contextual and relational elements. Qualitative mapping brings interconnectedness
and complexity (and ambiguity) back into the picture, though at the cost of analytical
precision. Qualitative studies in a research domain such as international student secu-
ritv should ideally be seen as part of a family of studies that includes both micro- and
macro-scale work, and both qualitative and quantitative projects.

Implications for Practice
We emphasize two implications for practice.

First, the interviews emphasize the importance of the early months of the student
sojourn. At this time, proficiency is the lowest but students face marked challenges.
Many students arrive with weak oral-communication capacity, as the EFL interview-
ees acknowledged. Students need a one-to-one audit of language proficiency on
arrival, remedial assistance and/or ongoing support as required, and periodic audits
during the sojourn. The literature (Gonzalez et al., 2001, Wilkinson & Kavan, 2003,
Zhu, 2004) suggests that assistance with academic writing, and to a lesser extent oral
communication, should be nested in disciplines.

Second, given the role of language proficiency in academic achievement and the flow
on effects across all domains of international student life, the acquisition of English-
language proficiency should be mandatory to all degree programs. In an education sys-
tem that services solely domestic students the question rarely arises. It is assumed that
graduates are fully competent in English. However, in international education, it seems
that the practices of teachers vary. Some teachers require native-level quality in written
work and oral expression, though few are trained to teach English to EFL learners. Others
teachers vary expectations about standards of English to fit the students, crediting
international students for good progress in knowledge content even if their English
expression is flawed (Author, 2008). It is unsurprising that many graduates, for example,
in technical fields such as accounting, complete their programs without basic English-
language proficiency. We favour the formalization of a regulated standard of English in
all degree programs. This would meet the needs of those EFL students for whom acqui-
sition of English-language proficiency is a high priority goal.

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