



# **Supporting Non-Native English Speakers at the University of Minnesota: Perspectives from Faculty, Staff, and Student Focus Groups**



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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



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## **Abstract**

Increasing international student enrollments in the recent past has important implications for internationalizing the classroom in US higher education. However, faculty and staff may often not understand the unique challenges that international students experience. To address this gap in understanding, we conducted a focus group study designed to learn more about perceived academic, social, and cultural barriers from the perspectives of international students, staff, faculty and teaching assistants from various academic departments at the University of Minnesota. The data from these focus groups reveal important insights about the multilayered challenges that international students experience and strategies that students, faculty, and staff focus group participants proposed to create a more internationalized and inclusive learning experience for all.

## Introduction

Recent trends in US higher education show an increase in international student enrollments starting in 2011 and extending through 2018 (Institute of International Education, 2018). This increase in the international student population has created opportunities for domestic students, staff, and faculty to experience more frequent intercultural interactions, which inherently offers more potential for all to engage in intercultural learning. In fact, various scholars have demonstrated educational benefits that may be connected to international and American student interactions. For example, Loes, Pascarella, and Umbach (2012) proposed that domestic students can increase critical thinking skills when they have meaningful interactions with international students, and Soria and Triosi (2014) showed how intercultural interactions can help to develop students' intercultural competence.

Yefanova, Baird, Montgomery, Woodruff, Kappler, and Johnstone (2015) also demonstrated multiple educational benefits of hosting international students on American campuses but asserted that instructors play a critical role in supporting meaningful cross-national interactions that help facilitate mutual intercultural learning. Other studies, however, have documented challenges that faculty often face when teaching international students who have unique cultural and linguistic needs (Andrade, 2010; Peters & Anderson, 2017; Haan, Gallagher, & Varandani, 2017; Jin & Schneider, 2019). Andrade (2010), for example, demonstrated that some of her faculty colleagues indicated a lack of interest in learning teaching practices to better support the linguistic needs of international students. Building from this study, Haan et al. (2017) reported that some faculty at their institution expressed resistance to adopting more inclusive teaching methods. Peters and Anderson (2017) suggested the need to normalize and reframe language development based on their findings that some faculty and staff perceived English language learning to be remedial. Furthermore, faculty respondents in all of these studies explained challenges they experience in communicating with international students and assessing their work.

Gaining clarity on faculty and staff perspectives is essential to creating an internationalized learning experience for international and American students. However, understanding international student perspectives about relevant academic, linguistic, and social challenges is also critical. Andrade (2006) discussed the barriers that international students may encounter when becoming acquainted with new teaching and learning requirements, developing social ties, and in navigating language challenges. Anderson, Isensee, Martin, Godfrey, and O'Brien (2012) shared how first year international students may face difficulties in learning and using academic English, interacting with faculty, and feeling connected to American students and the broader campus culture.

While our institution uses standardized assessments such as the International Student Barometer (ISB) to measure international student satisfaction, few formal studies have captured qualitative data to illustrate international student perspectives about their campus and classroom experiences. The rationale for conducting this focus group study was to better understand and triangulate perspectives

from faculty, staff, and students on topics identified in our previous survey research. The previous survey was administered to faculty and staff respondents on UMNTC campus by the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP) in spring 2016 (Peters & Anderson, 2017). Over 1,500 faculty and staff responded to this survey, reporting on their perceptions of working with non-native speakers of English, including benefits they perceived multilingual students to contribute, key challenges in the student experience, barriers that faculty and staff encounter when supporting multilingual students, and areas in which they could use more support.

These survey results were shared broadly through presentations to various UMNTC faculty and staff groups. Some participants who attended these presentations expressed interest in learning more about the survey topics from a student perspective, and some indicated a desire to get more contextualized faculty and staff feedback from specific campus units and groups. These factors motivated our interest in conducting focus group interviews to complement the survey research.

## Research Questions

To provide greater understanding of the barriers that international students experience and how faculty and staff attempt to help students overcome those challenges, we designed three main research questions to guide this focus group study.

1. What factors contribute to the communication barriers that international and multilingual students experience?
2. To what extent do students attribute their communication barriers to be related to culture or language?
3. What strategies do students, faculty, and staff identify as important in providing additional support to international and multilingual students?

## Data Collection & Analysis

In spring 2017, we collaboratively reviewed MELP survey findings to identify key areas of inquiry to explore in a series of focus groups. Focus group methodology was selected in order to provide in-depth, qualitative information about key themes from our survey findings. This methodology also allowed us to gather opinions from specific groups of students, faculty, and staff on campus. We were approved for IRB Level 2 (Exempt) permission to conduct the study.

We invited faculty and staff participants with the intention of learning more in-depth information about our survey findings, and we invited international student participants so that we could gain input on their perspectives about some of survey topics of interest. We used different methods to recruit participants for the faculty/staff groups and for the international student focus groups. When responding to the MELP survey in spring 2016, over 350 faculty and staff respondents indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview on the survey topics. To identify participants for the faculty and staff focus groups, we emailed those survey respondents with an invitation to participate in one of several focus group sessions on campus. International undergraduate student participants were

identified through an email recruitment process initiated by the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) office. Table 1 provides an overview of the numbers and types of focus group participants.

Table 1: *Overview of focus group participants*

<b>Participant Type</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Number of Focus Groups</b>
International Students	18	3
Teaching Assistants	9	2
Instructors and Faculty	13	3
Staff	30	5
Totals	70	13

International student participants represented the following colleges: CBS, CEHD, CFANS, CSE, CSOM, and CLA, and the School of Nursing. Faculty and TA participants represented various academic departments within the following colleges: CBS, CCAPS, CDES, CEHD, CFANS, CLA, CSE, and CSOM. Staff participants represented the following departments and colleges: Aurora Center, Disability Resource Center, Housing & Residential Life, Institute for Global Studies, University Bookstores, University Honors Program, University Libraries, School of Nursing, College of Veterinary Medicine, CBS, CCAPS, CDES, CEHD, CFANS, CLA, and CSOM.

Once the participants had been identified, we cofacilitated the focus groups using a semistructured interview protocol to inquire about the participants' experiences in supporting international and multilingual students. Interview questions were tailored slightly to fit the population represented by each focus group (International Students, Teaching Assistants (TAs), Instructors & Faculty, and Staff). Focus groups were conducted between April 13 and May 11, 2017. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and lunch was provided for those who participated. The focus group interviews were audio recorded after receiving permission from the participants present at each session. Detailed notes about the participants' responses were recorded during each session.

Once all the focus group interviews were complete, the audio recordings were transcribed by an outside transcription service, rev.com. We imported the transcriptions into Excel and then used an open coding process to analyze the interview transcriptions. This involved first analyzing each sentence of the interview transcripts, and then choosing to assign a code to a segment that held meaning relevant to our research questions (Maxwell, 2013). After analyzing the transcripts at the sentence level using this method, the two researchers agreed upon categories by reviewing the relationships between codes, or clusters of similar codes (Shank, 2006). As a final step, we then identified broader themes that corresponded to our research questions (Yin, 2014). This was a collaborative coding process whereby



the first coder identified initial themes in all of the transcripts, and the second coder checked the completed codes and flagged any that warranted further discussion. Differences in perspectives on emerging themes were openly discussed until consensus was reached about the most representative code to use for each segment of the transcript in question.

## Findings

Many of the perspectives offered by our focus group participants confirmed the previous survey findings but offered a more in-depth understanding, particularly from the new perspectives that our student participants offered. For example, similar to the views reported from faculty and staff survey respondents in the *Supporting Non-Native English Speakers* survey (Peters & Anderson, 2017), students in the focus groups discussed the challenges of learning how to use academic English in interactive settings, focusing largely on the difficulties they experienced in speaking proficiently, working in groups, and using academic vocabulary. These were themes that had emerged from faculty and staff perspectives in our survey, but we learned more of the nuances about why students found these areas of English to be most challenging.

We also found that participants from all focus groups emphasized peer interactions as a primary area of concern, which was a consistent theme that emerged from the survey research. Student participants illuminated new understanding about their experiences interacting with American peers.

We chose to categorize the findings into two major themes: according to barriers that international students face, and the strategies that were suggested by the focus group participants to overcome barriers. Specific themes relevant to these two categories are described in more detail below, with selected quotes provided.

## Barriers that International Students Experience

### **Barrier 1: “There’s a multilayering of things that are happening here.”**

Some faculty and staff participants articulated that the barriers that students experienced could not be attributed to just one challenge. Instead, they described a “multilayering of things” that often created compounded barriers for students. For example, if students are primarily experiencing language barriers, they may also be impacted by emotional stress, previous educational preparation, financial limitations, mental health concerns, and pressures from family, among other things. This “multilayering” theme that emerged is similar to the “complex challenges” theme from the faculty and staff survey (Peters & Anderson, 2017).

Staff participants described a range of pressures they observe students facing, such as a combination of academic and language stressors, homesickness that is sometimes compounded by discrimination, and an intense emotional and mental process of navigating life and communication in a new country. One staff member, for example, commented on how language challenges can intensify emotional turmoil for students: *“But it’s emotional for them, like every time, every second. Like when they mispronounce*

*something ... living in a different country with different languages it's ... It's a traumatic experience in some ways."*

Teaching assistant (TA) participants explained that students might have compounded academic and language challenges within one class. For example, if a student struggles to comprehend or complete reading course material, they are likely to have difficulty submitting a satisfactory writing assignment. Furthermore, some TAs expressed concern that international and multilingual students may struggle to adapt to the norms and expectations of US higher education, and that language challenges may intensify this acclimation process. A few faculty participants also observed that students' interrelated challenges with academic expectations, family pressures, and visa regulations could create heightened anxiety. One faculty member commented *"... when you talk to students, you hear students describe a lot of pressure, family expectations back home and, and also, you know, graduation timelines and, and visa timelines ... those complicate, um, you know, concerns about completing a program."*

Some of our student participants illustrated these multilayered challenges when they expressed anxieties about their confidence levels, speaking proficiency, and their ability to negotiate cultural and social dynamics in group discussions. For example, one student talked about the emotional and social aspects of contributing to group discussions: *"... you're trying to communicate with your group members. And uh, you just cannot pronounce these thing [sic] right. If they ever having problem understanding you, and you feel so humiliated and not- just kind of discourage you a little more."*

One important takeaway to note from this theme is that faculty and staff will likely be better prepared to support multilingual students when they are more aware of the complex "multilayering" of factors that influence students' experiences. Staff, faculty, and domestic students may be out of touch with the complicated challenges that multilingual students face—for example, emotional stressors associated with cultural transitions, the exhausting experience of studying in a second language, navigating unfamiliar academic expectations, and the difficulties of trying to establish a new support network. Trainings and online resources featuring student perspectives may help to deepen the understanding that faculty, staff, and domestic students have about international student barriers.

### **Barrier 2: "Navigating campus bureaucracy"**

Faculty and staff participants described a range of challenges they observe students to have when acclimating to various expectations in the campus environment, including the following: navigating administrative policies, the advising system, and classroom expectations; finding a supportive network; and identifying and using the correct resources for support. This theme has some similarities to the "confusing processes" described by many survey respondents (Peters & Anderson, 2017), but this "campus bureaucracy" theme is broader in scope than the previous survey findings.

Staff participants explained how sometimes international students seemed to struggle to understand academic requirements, distrust advisor communication, attempt to be granted exceptions for policies, and rely on potentially unreliable perspectives to help make important decisions. Staff in our focus

groups also expressed concerns regarding the challenges of orienting new international students to campus. Some participants observed the logistical challenges of students navigating a large university and learning how to use important resources on campus. Another staff participant talked about the difficulties of orientation, particularly trying to communicate large amounts of information to students and helping them register for classes with a limited availability: *"... [when] international students first come to campus, they are arriving right before school starts, when course selection is at its worst, and with that additional processing time we are trying to conduct orientation, which is uh, it's much more concentrated and labor intensive to explain all of the things that a student needs to know."*

TA participants discussed their observations that international multilingual students often seemed too intimidated to seek help when needed, were unsure how to use office hours, and were unclear about how to comply with specific academic expectations that often vary by departments. Faculty participants also explained their concerns that they perceived students to struggle with language and culture shock upon their arrival to the university, which could have negative implications for their performance over the course of a semester. Similar to the views of staff participants, some faculty participants recognized that students had to confront numerous challenges during orientation, including physically orienting themselves to a huge campus and figuring out which courses to take, all while dealing with language and culture shock.

As many scholars have pointed out, navigating a new culture and acclimating to unfamiliar academic expectations can be trying, disorienting, and exhausting, particularly for new international students (Anderson et al., 2012; Andrade, 2006). Several concerns raised by the focus group participants within this theme implicate a need for enhanced support during orientation, thoughtful explanations of campus resources from faculty, staff, and TAs, and strategic communication about courses and program requirements from advisers. To illustrate this need, one faculty member explained his perspective as follows: *"I think we're asking an awful lot of incoming international students because not only are they negotiating the huge campus, but we're asking them to account for their prior training ... and um, I think that admissions and the colleges and the departments need to do a better job of sort of helping students navigate that process ..."*

Student participants in our focus group study did not directly mention the campus bureaucracy challenges raised by faculty, TAs, and staff, but it is likely they have valuable perspectives to offer regarding the concerns outlined here. It would be beneficial to get more direct feedback from students on the major challenges they perceive in this category and how to best support them in navigating the various types of campus bureaucracy they may experience.

### **Barrier 3: "They don't know how to interact..."**

In this theme, we heard faculty and staff describe challenges they observed in students' intercultural interactions both in and out of the classroom. While there was some discussion among the focus group participants around the tendency that international students have to segregate into monocultural

groups, participants expressed notably stronger concerns about the need to better prepare domestic students to interact effectively with international students.

Staff participants explained a variety of observations they had about international and domestic student interactions. Some staff members pointed out that while international students seemed to be eager for intercultural friendships, they often seemed to lack confidence to initiate conversations with American students. Other staff participants argued that American students were often unwelcoming and sometimes even exclusive or discriminatory, which further discouraged international students from attempting interactions. One staff respondent explained that both international and domestic students alike demonstrated a need for training to prepare them to navigate cultural and language differences: *“I think we assume that people are experienced enough or at a developmental curiosity in as 18 to 22 year olds, it really isn’t there. At least it’s not there in a way in which people can really, um, confront each other and learn from each other. That desire is there but that, the tools are not there.”*

Faculty and TA participants expressed similar concerns. For example, one faculty member commented that her domestic students had little international experience and thus demonstrated a lack of understanding about how to interact in intercultural exchanges:

*“I always poll my students who do a diversity class, And, you know, a few of the undergraduates say, ‘Okay,’ they’ve gone off to Mexico and they’ve been in the tourist bubble. [...] They haven’t ever interacted, they haven’t interacted with people from foreign countries, so they’re completely unprepared in a way.”*

According to another faculty member, even American students who want to study abroad may not realize the valuable intercultural experiences they can have with international students in their classrooms at the University of Minnesota: *“They [domestic students] totally don’t pay attention to so many international student ... sitting next to them in the classroom. And then ... you know with the, they, international students’ asset is just totally ignored.”* Similar to our staff participants, faculty participants acknowledged the complications in creating mutually beneficial intercultural relationships in their classrooms, particularly in helping domestic students to understand, appreciate, and work toward forging intercultural friendships and partnerships.

Notably, some faculty and TA participants also commented on the importance of creating safe and supportive spaces for international students who have to work harder to express themselves and be understood. However, some international students may have a harder time breaking out of their comfort zones to participate in discussions or join groups of American students. One TA participant discussed the difficulty of integrating students when international students seemed to be unwilling to separate from their clusters of friends from the same country: *“And they just were really unwilling to kind of break out of that comfort. Which I totally respected ... but it wasn’t fostering any sort of like, intercultural communication, or like you know if they’re just in the corner like... I struggled with it a lot.”*

Faculty also commented on the intensified challenges they observed in group work when students were intentionally mixed. Faculty participants perceived that sometimes international students would

withdraw from the group discussions or activities due to lower language abilities or a lack of confidence. On the other hand, they also recognized that American students sometimes played a role in intentionally dismissing or excluding international students' contributions from group work. Furthermore, when the group work activities were graded, faculty felt that the anxieties and frustrations were often intensified for both American and international students.

International student focus group participants confirmed the challenges of interacting with American students and elaborated some specific difficulties they had encountered. Students described feeling anxious about working in teams because they often found themselves struggling to keep up with the conversation, both in regards to listening to fast speech and being able to jump in to contribute a valuable opinion in a timely manner. International students also described times when their American peers often did not seem to be willing to slow down, include them, or explain if there were questions. A few students mentioned that the group dynamic was very dependent on the personalities of the American students in their groups.

There was also considerable discussion among international student participants about the lack of intercultural awareness that they felt many American students demonstrated. For example, one international student participant explained her understanding of American student intercultural awareness as follows:

*"... actually people here, especially at the U, they came from a small town ... and they've never been to the other countries, even to other states, you know. Um, so probably the furthest place they've been to is Georgia, you can't blame them for being ignorant, right? Because they don't know what it's like to be in China, or in Korea, or in Asia or something else—somewhere else. So at first, I was, like, really angry that when people ask me, like, 'do you eat cats?' Like, I don't."*

Other student participants concurred with this, noting that American students seemed to be uncomfortable, and in some cases disinterested, in interacting with international students. Overall, this was a frustrating dynamic. One student participant commented, "So for Americans here, like, for domestic students I'd say, if you wanna be successful you'll work with different people. And you should really try to work with different people. Because ... like you are not gonna pass for, like, ignoring someone during a meeting."

#### **Barrier 4: "It's more of a culture thing."**

Notably, when asked whether they experienced more communication challenges related to culture or language barriers, several student participants explained that they experienced the most intense language barriers when they first arrived in the United States. Some students discussed speaking in academic settings (presentations, discussions, and other interactions) as their most difficult challenge, and several highlighted how difficult it can be to learn and use academic vocabulary.

When comparing language and cultural barriers, however, the majority of students in our focus group sessions perceived cultural barriers to be more complex and more integral to their ability to relate to course materials and form successful social networks. Some student participants commented that

improving their language proficiency was more straightforward because they could identify opportunities to practice, but acclimating to the culture and developing their sociocultural knowledge took a longer time and was a more ambiguous process. Examples of challenges that students mentioned included picking up on cultural examples in class, adapting to American sense of humor, and understanding all of the “hidden meanings” about pop culture embedded in small talk. To illustrate this perspective, one student participant explained that *“after a while I think most of us here speak pretty good English and don’t have such [language] problems anymore. Then after that, it’s more of a culture thing I think. People who grow up here like, how they party is different from the way we hang out. And all those, like, TV shows and how they grew up. The songs, all those things you can’t make conversations with.”* Another student pointed out that if international students do not understand the cultural references in a conversation, then it is very difficult to join the conversation, which can often result in international students taking on the role of an outsider in settings with American students.

## Suggested Strategies to Help Students Overcome Barriers

### Strategy 1: “Establishing some credibility” with students

Several of our focus group participants described the importance of “establishing some credibility” when interacting with international students. These participants described the value of communicating in an intentional way that demonstrates care and compassion.

For example, some of our staff participants talked about taking extra time to communicate in ways that would help encourage international students. One staff member described herself as a coach, explaining that she used various strategies to advocate for her students, including giving tutorials about how various campus resources work, pointing out examples of other successful students to provide students with models, and giving tips for how students should talk to faculty. Another staff participant described herself as *“a parent or an aunt,”* and shared how she frequently is able to establish a strong trusting relationship with students after she tells them directly, *“I’m invested in your success.”* One other staff participant explained that she intentionally relates to students’ challenges and makes a point to directly affirm students’ strengths: *“... what I see that works is sort of making them understand that, like, I know they’re smart. And I, I value their intellectual and creative abilities. And that I understand that just because they can’t, you know, sometimes the challenges of not just writing but also reading, it takes them longer.”*

TA participants shared similar strategies, with a focus on finding ways to demonstrate they cared about students beyond classroom performance. Similar to the staff participant’s approach described above, one TA participant explained she directly tells students about her commitment to their success and is very intentional about recognizing their progress and improvements. Other TA participants discussed how they tried to give more feedback on students’ writing as a way to show their care for students. One TA also described how he intentionally asks about life outside of class: *“But I have had students, you*

*know, like, they come in for their first check-up appointment. I'm asking them, you know, how are things going outside of academics. I, just like, how is your, your life here?"*

A few of our student participants also mentioned ways that faculty had worked to establish credibility in previous classes they had taken. For example, one student participant described how one of her professors had taken considerable time in class to explain new and unfamiliar words, and that had greatly impressed her. Another student participant shared how she appreciated how much time her professor took to answer her questions during office hours.

### **Strategy 2: Empowering “students [to be] advocates and champions for themselves...”**

Many faculty, TA, and staff participants described a belief that successful multilingual students are those who are persistent in their determination to overcome various barriers. Several focus group participants described the importance of self-advocacy in terms of students being willing to ask questions, network with other classmates, identify and use resources, recognize it is okay to make mistakes, and be confident in their strengths. “Asking questions” was described by multiple focus group participants as the most important strategy for international students to learn; in fact, some participants expressed concern that if students were reluctant to ask for help, it might hinder their capacity for success.

One staff participant explained the perception that students increase their chances for success when they “... are not afraid to say, ‘I don’t understand.’ Or, ‘Can you tell me again?’” The focus on learning clarification and questioning strategies was echoed by many other staff participants. Besides asking questions, staff also talked about the importance of attending resource fairs, department events, visiting the library, and using tutoring and office hours when needed. In addition, other staff and faculty participants discussed how students with extroverted personalities are more likely to be successful. One staff member explained her perspective as follows:

*“And so I think if they can get over that shyness that some of them have ... and get past the fact that they have an accent or might be sometimes hard to understand them, but just be bold and themselves. I think that’s what can help them be successful.”*

However, some staff participants voiced their recognition that extroverted activities such as asking questions and using resources is not always easy to do, depending on a student’s confidence levels or their cultural background. Notably, one staff member pointed out that there may be even a systemic bias at work that helps extroverts succeed, commenting that *“the system is rigged for extroverts, native speaker or non-native speaker alike.”*

Similar to staff participants, faculty and TA participants also emphasized that students need to learn to ask questions more freely in the American classroom, and that it is important for students to get comfortable making mistakes. One faculty participant pointed out that students who assertively ask questions are more likely to adapt effectively to new expectations and learning styles:

*“But the students who kind of overcome that I think quickly have [to] adapt to the new way of learning, do ask questions. Some don’t, but some realize, ‘Oh, if I don’t know this word, I can ask during the test and find out what it is,’ and those students do well. I was really impressed, specifically by one student ... international student who would read*

*ahead, um, like a week ahead, and then she would come ask me before the quiz, like, 'I don't know what this word is. I don't understand this,' you know, and I was—wow, okay, so as she had really figured out how to ... how to adapt with, um, the language barriers ..."*

While emphasizing the need for students to ask questions, focus group participants also recognized that students may at times feel too vulnerable to do so due to language proficiency, confidence levels, or cultural beliefs about asking for help. Despite the acknowledgement of how difficult it may be to ask questions, there was little to no discussion in our focus groups about what conditions or factors would help students to feel more comfortable to ask questions. Students, however, did have some ideas to share about what might make them more comfortable to ask questions. One student participant explained how much she appreciated getting one-on-one help during office hours, and another student suggested devoting a strategic use of class time for question-asking: *"... I think one thing that [is] really helpful for those kind of people, or just for international students in general, will be to offer five minutes after lectures, or longer, shorter, to actually offer the opportunity for people who don't want to, you know, just raise your hand and ask questions."*

### **Strategy 3: Facilitating "a connection with other students ..."**

Faculty, staff, and student participants talked about the importance of creating "a connection with students" as a key strategy for support. Specific suggestions for doing this included creating peer mentoring opportunities, intentionally assigning mixed small groups to promote interaction and participation in class, and even structuring "forced interactions" when necessary as a way to help students become more comfortable over time interacting together.

Staff participants focused heavily on discussing the potential benefits of different types of peer mentoring. Some explained that they try to connect students from the same country so they can feel supported by someone who understands their culture and language. Other staff participants discussed the value of having a peer mentor assigned to new students during orientation. One staff participant explained how they had established a system to create resources for new international students within their academic department: *"Previous international students have created resources for incoming international students, so the ability to mentor future students, whether they're from the same part of the world or not..."*

A few student participants also mentioned specific ways that they believed peer connections could be beneficial. Two students talked about the importance of international students breaking out of their comfort zones to talk with American students. One student said that having an American roommate forced her to practice English more and feel more confident speaking in English. Two other student participants mentioned conversational strategies: one listened carefully to how American students talked to each other, and then tried to apply what she observed in her own conversations. Another student tried to focus on finding common topics of interest to discuss with American students. Only one student explained an instructional strategy that helped to create connections. She shared how one of her professors started every class with a different get-to-know-you icebreaker, which helped her to feel comfortable and eventually connect with other students in the class: *"I feel that, that icebreaker thing*



*really helped to facilitate this kind of conversation and relationships between classmates, which I really, really liked.”*

When discussing strategies for helping students make connections, faculty and TA focus group participants focused a lot on assigning pair or small-group work during class. These instructors realized that larger group discussions were not likely to be conducive to helping quieter students talk, and thus recognized the value of smaller groups to help encourage participation and facilitate connections. One faculty member described how pair work helped connect students in class:

*“... have students just talk with their immediate neighbors—rather than the whole group of nine, eight or nine—and that seems to help and they build relationships with the people, you know, students like to sit in the same spot every time, so they build a relationship with the students that they’re next to.”*

This small-group strategy for building student relationships and promoting engagement from all students was echoed by several faculty and TAs, and a few faculty and TA participants discussed the importance of “*forcibly mixing them up*” to prevent monocultural groups from being the default.

#### **Strategy 4: Normalizing language development and “figuring out where to send students...”**

Several participants talked about the importance of “normalizing” campus resources to decrease the stigma sometimes associated with help-seeking, and to ensure that international students didn’t feel singled out. The TA focus group also discussed the importance of normalizing the process of learning and using language. Several TA participants highlighted their belief that the academic language of their specific discipline (statistics, literature, etc.) is “*kind of a new language to everybody.*” They explained how this realization helped them reframe how they viewed all students’ contributions in class. One TA participant described his thoughts on this as follows:

*“everyone’s trying to master the language of statistics at the same time, and so from that standpoint, um, it’s just great to see like, people from all different places and all different languages trying to accomplish the same thing. There’s that instant commonality, and I think that probably makes it easier for native and non-native speakers to talk to one another in class, because they’re both struggling with the same thing. And, so it’s not the original language that’s any kind of barrier, it’s the one that they’re all trying to learn.”*

The perspectives that TA participants shared here contribute to a larger narrative about the importance of normalizing language development, a theme also discussed in the previous survey report (Peters & Anderson, 2017).

Relatedly, faculty, staff, and TA participants discussed the need to have greater awareness of resources on campus relevant to international students. One TA participant expressed frustration at having had no training on campus services. Faculty participants echoed a desire to have more awareness of resources and to know more confidently which resources to suggest for students. Throughout the focus group sessions, participants mentioned different ideas for how to increase awareness of resources at the

faculty and staff level, such as visiting department meetings, offering brown bag lunch sessions, making sure relevant emails get forwarded to all, and identifying gaps in internal communication flows. TA participants also discussed the importance of normalizing resources for all students: one TA explained her strategy was to make a *“normalizing statement to the whole class, like these are resources that you can use, and I want all of you to know this and feel okay using it.”*

A few staff participants highlighted some possible barriers to increasing resource awareness. One staff member pointed out that some faculty and staff may not pass along information about resources because they do not see it as their job to educate others about campus services. Another staff participant indicated there’s an extra layer of work involved in communicating about resources. She explained that as staff in her department learn about relevant resources for international students, they have to find ways to pass this information along in various internal communications to faculty, staff, and students. She commented *“we’ve ... kind of started trying to integrate in some of our internal communications more like, every fall when the next batch of international grad students arrives, we’re gonna send this information to faculty and remind them that these resources are here, um, just to kind of help with that.”* In this case, she expressed a willingness to enhance communication, but others may not be willing or aware of the need to change such communication protocols.

A few of our student participants confirmed they felt it was important for faculty to make all students aware of all of the available resources in a manner that did not single out a particular group. Another student participant explained that she appreciated how intentional some of her professors had been in suggesting specific campus resources for extra help. At this point, several participants clarified they did not find resource referrals to be offensive if they could sense that the professor authentically cared about them. One student participant shared about a negative experience she had, when a professor told her: *“Go to the Writing Center before you give your paper to me, ’cause I’m not your editor. I’m your professor...”* The student expressed frustration at the tone the professor used when suggesting the Writing Center as a resource.

Relatedly, referring students to get writing support was frequently mentioned as a resource-related challenge by faculty and TA participants. Some participants explained they were simply unaware of the writing support available to students, and other participants felt it would be beneficial to understand the specific approaches that the writing support centers used to help students. Some faculty also discussed challenges with referring students to campus resources that provide writing support. For example, one faculty commented: *“sometimes they’re [students] very open to suggesting that they need help with their writing and then sometimes they’re a bit resistant because they think they don’t, shouldn’t need it.”* Furthermore, similar to the previous faculty and staff survey research (Peters & Anderson, 2017), some faculty discussed their uncertainty about how to grade students’ writing, for example, whether they should be more lenient when evaluating grammar, and how to discern what is a student’s accent versus what is a more serious error and interfering with clarity. The concerns shared by faculty and TAs indicate a need both for greater understanding about the writing support offered on

campus, and a need for faculty to engage in development that equips them to more confidently and effectively respond to multilingual student writers.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the main purposes of this study was to inquire and learn more about the findings from our *Supporting Non-Native English Speakers* survey research, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences faculty and staff have when working with multilingual students, and to hear student perspectives on similar topics. Our focus group findings confirmed much of what we previously learned from our survey research. However, some emerging themes from this focus group study provided us with new insights on the barriers international students face, and strategies for how students can overcome those barriers, as well as important takeaways for how faculty and staff themselves can be better equipped. Critical points for consideration are highlighted below.

**All students may benefit from resources and training that prepares them to interact more effectively across language and cultural barriers.** International student participants expressed that one of their greatest challenges, beyond even the difficulties of learning and using academic English, was interacting with American peers and navigating group dynamics. Some international students explicitly stated their frustrations about the lack of interest American students seemed to have in getting to know them or including them in group discussions. TA, staff, and faculty echoed these concerns, stating observations about the lack of motivation or preparedness that American students often seem to have when engaging with international students in classroom or cocurricular settings. However, some faculty and TA participants also described international students as unwilling to move away from conational peer groups in class, and our international student participants provided insights about some of the reasons for this reluctance. When they were assigned by the instructor to work in mixed national groups, international students explained how difficult it was for them to keep up with the discussion and be perceived by their peers as valuable contributors. In the theme of “it’s more of a culture thing,” students explained that while they could identify tangible strategies to improve their English, and time spent in the culture facilitated this, some found it harder to navigate discussions and social interactions that required cultural insider knowledge.

While it is invaluable to learn about the perceived tensions involved in peer interactions, it is also important to acknowledge that we did not include American students as interviewees. However, in a case study that compared American and international student perspectives about their experiences interacting in groups together, Peters (2018) found that both American and international students reported various levels of discomfort in their group work. International student participants described their discomfort in terms of language barriers and cultural differences, and American student participants echoed these challenges. Some American students also described uncertainty about how to break the ice with international students, as well as concern that they would offend international students if they said the wrong thing or put them on the spot. Through documented group work observations and corresponding interviews, Peters noted that several American students made intentional attempts to involve international students in a conversation, with varying results. In some

cases, the international students seemed reticent to respond to questions or prompts. In other cases, American students seemed to be uncertain of how to overcome communication barriers that arose when international students did participate. For example, one American student participant recalled an interaction that she perceived to be uncomfortable on both sides:

*“it seemed too like she [the international student] talked really quietly and she had, like, a fairly thick accent, so I know ... I didn’t catch everything she said, and I feel like she was maybe shy about that or self-conscious about that. And ... I felt a little, like, awkward about it too, where it’s, like, do I ask her to repeat herself or...? ’Cause I just can’t ... you could tell she seemed a little uncomfortable as well...”* (Peters, 2018, p. 178)

In another group composed of three international students and one American student, students experienced multiple communication challenges, and in this case, even the professor expressed uncertainty about how to help students work through the communication barriers they faced.

Notably, the American students’ expression of uncertainty about how to navigate communication challenges (Peters, 2018) reinforces the concerns some faculty and staff shared in our study, that both groups of students need more support and tools to engage in meaningful peer interactions across culture and language differences. Furthermore, the inclusion of American student perspectives helps to address an important gap in our understanding and is recommended as an important priority for future studies.

While the difficult dynamics involved with peer interactions was a strong concern in this focus group study, faculty, staff, and TA participants named “a connection with other students” as a valuable strategy to provide more effective support to multilingual students and facilitate intercultural learning. This demonstrates an important paradox to consider: while developing new forms of intercultural connection between students may be highly desired, students may not benefit from these opportunities unless they are provided with coaching and support for how to engage with one another and overcome culture and language barriers.

**Students may become more adept at “navigating campus bureaucracy” if faculty and staff can develop subcultures in which language development is normalized, and a variety of ways to engage with resources are provided to students.** Similar to previous survey findings (Peters & Anderson, 2017), many faculty and staff participants expressed concerns that multilingual students seem reluctant to ask questions. Some participants, in fact, felt that multilingual students were able to overcome barriers when they learned how to be “*advocates and champions for themselves.*” Self-advocacy behaviors named by faculty and staff participants included asking questions regularly, using resources proactively, and finding opportunities to network and be involved. However, one staff participant pointed out that the university system often poses considerable barriers to multilingual students, which was echoed by concerns mentioned in the “navigating campus bureaucracy” theme. Another staff participant explained that students have to figure out how to work within a “*system rigged for extroverts.*”

This particular concern raised about potential systemic bias favoring extroverts is worthy of consideration for academic departments and campus services that wish to be more inclusive of students

representing diverse backgrounds and personality types. In her research advocating for the strengths of introverts, Cain (2013) addressed cultural perceptions of introversion and extroversion, describing the “Extrovert Ideal” (p. 190) as the tendency of Western culture to value extroverted personalities over introverted personalities. Cain cited various research from academic settings to show how extroverted students are often perceived to be smarter and have the most leadership potential (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009, cited in Cain, 2013). In fact, the manner in which faculty and staff described successful self-advocates in this study demonstrates a potential bias toward extroverted students, particularly with the recognition that extroverted behaviors are those that help students experience success in the university system. Considering the effort students may need to exert when navigating various forms of campus bureaucracy, and the compounding influence of culture and language difficulties, multilingual students may benefit from faculty and staff advocates who seek to minimize barriers, normalize help-seeking, and offer resources and opportunities to interact in a variety of forms. Relatedly, from the various perspectives highlighted in this study, it is clear that resource awareness is a high priority and also a critical need for many University faculty and staff. More strategic and comprehensive outreach from offices that offer support to multilingual students could be helpful to address this gap. Faculty and staff within individual units may need to identify new ways of communicating to both colleagues and students about resources.

Our understanding of how to communicate about resources can be enhanced in the future by learning more directly from multilingual and international students. Multilingual students within specific departments may be able to offer valuable perspectives about the best ways to contextualize resources. Several student participants explained that they appreciated learning about resources when they were offered as a gesture of genuine support, and indicated that they may be more willing to ask questions if they were given an intentional space and time to do so. Our student participants also named instructional practices that they perceived to be helpful in minimizing barriers, including providing lecture notes, explaining difficult vocabulary, actively promoting campus resources, and offering one-to-one support through office hours. How these recommendations can be effectively accomplished may vary by department, and students themselves are likely to offer some of the most important insights into what will be useful in their specific majors or colleges.

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