

Language and What Else? Academic Integration of International Students in a Thai University

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Abstract

Studies have indicated that language plays a central role in international students' academic integration. With an interest in Thailand, this study aimed to explore factors that affected international students' academic integration. Initial data were collected from a discussion group attended by Thai and international students. Preliminary analysis of data using Antconc, a concordancing program, revealed the top words used were Thai, students, language, English, international, good, benefit, help, and study. Thereafter, insights from the concordance lines were used to develop guided questions for individual semi-structured interviews. Three international graduate students volunteered for the interview. Thematic analysis revealed that three topics, consisting of internal, external and institutional factors, had a bearing on academic integration. The findings indicated that while language, or other pertinent sociocultural factors, were pivotal for international students' academic integration, there are also other factors worth considering.

Keywords: *Academic integration, international students, higher education, Thailand*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the Thai higher education scene has seen the introduction of numerous international programs (Rhein, 2016). With the primary aim of serving local students, international programs in Thailand have also attracted students from neighboring regions (Lavankura, 2013), as well as academics from around the world (Burford et al., 2018). Aside from offering a more affordable tuition, local and regional students are able to access English medium education with an English-based curriculum (Rhein, 2016; Lao, 2019). With this development, international students have become central to Thai higher education institutions. More than a source of income for institutions, they also bring with them diverse perspectives that allow the implementation of an international curriculum and internationalized Thai classrooms. Recognizing the impact of international students, it becomes necessary for higher education institutions to better understand factors that may come into play when integrating a new education culture in a different country.

While studies have critically examined the internationalization of higher education (e.g., Rhein, 2016; Boossabong, 2018; Lao, 2019), very few have actually looked international students' academic integration (Rhein, 2018; Rhein & Jones, 2020). This is especially relevant in the peculiar sociolinguistic context such as that seen in Thailand. This needs to be addressed, given that Thai universities steadily are gaining global recognition. Furthermore, it is predicted that Thailand will become a regional educational hub in the coming years (Wilang, 2017), due to government policies, such as the creation of National Research University Initiative and Research Promotion in Higher Education Project spearheaded by the Office of Higher Education (OHEC) in 2009 (see also Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018).

In the succeeding sections, the paper provides a review of related literature, followed by the study context. Thereafter, details about the research methodology, including the participants, data collection and analytical frameworks are given. The results are discussed, as well as possible avenues for future studies.

Literature Review

University students' socialization into a higher education setting may be understood by looking at the notion of academic integration appropriate to a particular sociocultural domain. Broadly speaking, and according to Baker and Siryk (1999), there are four concepts involved in academic integration: (1) academic adjustment, which covers educational demands; (2) social adjustment, which covers interpersonal-societal demands; (3) personal and emotional adjustment, which covers psychological and physical distress; and (4) attachment, which covers the educational institutional goals. Other authors, such as Almurideef (2016) and Ejiofo (2010), identified the following factors affecting international students: those related to culture (e.g., culture shock), emotional state (e.g., depression and anxiety), negative attitudes of the locals (e.g., discrimination), academic involvement (e.g., collaborative learning), and difficulties in social integration, among others.

These concepts represent the complex nature of higher education—a domain where students are confronted with views and perspectives. To successfully maneuver higher education and to achieve integration, authors have proposed the necessity of developing an intercultural disposition and competence (Young et al., 2013). An intercultural disposition and competence, however, may vary depending on the sociocultural context of a student. For instance, in an English-speaking context, international students have been found to integrate well into the academic and non-academic aspects of higher education given that they have acceptable levels of English language proficiency (for academic purposes) and have recurring social contacts with peers of the same nationality (Young et al., 2013). On the contrary, in a non-English speaking context, intercultural competence is crucial for international students to socialize with other non-local students. A common language such as English is also prioritized, but not necessarily for academic purposes; instead, it is used as a social tool for non-local students (Dalib et al., 2017)

Insights from English and Non-English Speaking Environments

With high number of international students, many studies on academic integration have been conducted in the West. In the US, 2014 was the year when the country hosted 886,052 international students, with China as the top-sending country followed by India, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan (Almurideef, 2016). These international students do not necessarily transition smoothly into a new sociocultural setting. In the same study, it was reported that Saudi Arabians' challenges included "culture, educational background, language, religion, family, economics, and gender issues" (Heyn, 2013, as cited in Almurideef, 2016, p. 8). Similarly, in the UK, international students experienced adjustment barriers on account of the language used, cultural perspectives, and academic conventions (Eze & Inegbedion, 2015). To overcome these challenges, students need to feel empowered. Brunton and Jeffrey (2014), in their survey of 196 international students in New Zealand universities, found that being empowered is significantly affected by students' ability in the English language, their academic motivation, and their sense of distance with the host culture. These reports illustrate the centrality of the English language as a factor that facilitates academic integration. In non-English speaking environments insights about academic integration are distinct. For instance, among international students in South Korea, Alemu and Cordier (2017) reported that factors contributing to student satisfaction included academic and education quality, effective communication before going to Korea, socializing with Koreans and foreigners, understanding the Korean language, numbers of years residing in Korea, information accuracy, living arrangements, economic support, and East Asian culture. Similar to the study of Dalib and colleagues (2017), there seemed to be a need for students to equip themselves with a communicative tool for academic integration.

In the context of Thailand, academic integration may not be necessarily driven by high proficiency in the English language. Instead, the use and manifestation of English may be shaped by the tenets of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), where English is used with a certain level of intelligibility (Seidlhofer, 2005). This can mean that English use emulates local social practices, with speakers being tolerant towards deviations from what is typically considered correct or standard (Sung, 2020). On top of the probable tolerance seen through the use of ELF, academic integration among international students

from neighboring countries may also be facilitated by Thailand's proximity (geographical and cultural) with their home countries. Nonetheless, academic integration in a non-English speaking context may also be affected by issues such as prejudice, as that seen in the study of Rhein (2018) and Rhein and Jones (2020), where international students in Thailand encountered different experiences of racism. On one hand, students have found excessive attention due to the host community not having any social encounters before (e.g., never seen an African American), being isolated for not being able to communicate in Thai, or the preconceived notion of a disparity in class (e.g., always thinking that Burmese students have great financial difficulties).

To explore factors affecting the academic integration of international students in Thailand, this study took on a descriptive approach by using a corpus analysis tool—AntConc. Subsequently, we employed thematic analysis to understand the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Our methodology offered a different approach for the study of international students and academic integration, which have been examined primarily through surveys (e.g., Rujiprak, 2016; Rujiprak & Limprasert, 2016).

The Study

In 2012, the Ministry of University in Thailand reported 16,999 international students enrolled at various higher education institutions. The student population represented at least 135 countries from around the world, with most students originating from Asia such as China, Myanmar, and Vietnam. However, in 2017, the number dropped to 12,000 according to the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2019). Despite the drop in numbers, Thailand remains an attractive educational hub, due to collaborative programs between Thai and foreign universities, the increasing number of English-taught courses, and the establishment of branch campuses of foreign institutes.

A top-ranked, and one of the most internationalized universities in Thailand, was chosen for the study. This institution is one of the most recognized research universities in Thailand. In addition, it is one of the top-ranked universities since 2008 according to the Times Higher Education Asia. It is also quite international. For example, in this university, using 2017 data, there were 758 students from 59 countries with the highest proportion coming from Japan (39%). The other top sending countries included Indonesia (8%), Vietnam (5%), Cambodia (4%), France (3%), and China (3%). To retain anonymity of the university under study, it is herein referred to as *University X Bangkok*.

Participants

The number and nationalities of the participants in the study was varied according to the phase of data collection (two phases). The first phase included students enrolled in an academic writing course in Semester 2 of the 2017 school year. In this course, there was a group task, where both Thai and international students discussed the following topic: "Is it beneficial for foreign students to study with Thais? Why?" In total, 15 students took part voluntarily in this phase.

The second phase involved the focus group interview where three international students deeper reflected more deeply on factors affecting the academic integration of international students. In this phase, only three participants agreed to take part in the interview. They were all international students coming from Asia, namely, Myanmar, Cambodia and Pakistan (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant's Information

Number	Country of origin	Level of study	Year level	Area of study
1	Cambodian	Master	1	Engineering
2	Pakistan	Master	1	Biotechnology
3	Myanmar	Master	1	Engineering

Data Collection Procedures

The first phase of data collection was done through a discussion among students about academic integration in the Thai higher education context. One of the researchers was the discussion moderator who initiated and facilitated the discussion in order to prompt students' reflection about their

experience in a multinational class. After the spoken data were transcribed, Antconc was used to identify the most frequently used words. Frequently recurring words were used to generate interview questions.

The researchers relied on frequently occurring words from the group discussion to create interview questions to minimize influence from their subjectivities. These questions were asked to the three students who agreed to participate. The three participants were told at the beginning of the interview that their identities would not be revealed and their information would not affect their academic results in any subject. With this assurance, they felt free to express concerns about issues they faced while pursuing their degrees in a Thai higher education institute. Some of the questions in the individual interview were as follows: (1) How do you find life in Thailand? (2) What do you think about using Thai to communicate with others? (3) How do you find the educational system here? (4) What kind of help you have had since you come to study here?

Data Analysis

Similar to the data collection process, there were also two phases of data analysis.

Phase One: Frequency Analysis

The words participants used in the interaction could signify meaningful objects, entities, or notions pertinent to the discussion topic. This accords with the discourse theory that words are signifiers of the epistemology or experiences of the interlocutor (Loo et al., 2019). We identified these recurring words through the use of AntConc. In addition to creating interview questions, these repeated words also gave us a scoping view of what academic integration meant.

Phase Two: Thematic Analysis

The second phase of data analysis focused on the content of what was said in the interview. Thematic analysis was employed, which uses inductive analysis as a process for coding data without having pre-existing coding themes. To reveal themes or core meanings, it is important to distinguish “theme” as different from “patterns.” A theme, according to Patton (2002), refers to a categorical or topical idea, while pattern refers to the description of findings—how a topic unfolds. Hence, the participants’ interviews were observed by paying particular attention at the topical ideas that emerged.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, words derived through frequency analysis are presented and then the themes in three broad categories: internal, external and institutional factors. All of these are discussed, along with interview excerpts, in verbatim form.

The most frequent content words, relating to respondents’ responses, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Word Frequency from Group Discussion

Rank	Word	Frequency
1	Thai	64
2	Students	33
3	Language	29
4	English	19
5	International	17
6	Good	16
7	Benefit	14
7	Help	14
7	Study	14

In our earlier discussion, it was pointed out that other studies have indicated the significance of language, and other related attributes, such as culture, as factors affecting academic integration. As seen in Table 2, Thai, Language, and English, are in the top nine words of our frequency analysis. This gives us precursory insights into the role that these sociocultural factors play in international students' academic integration.

The interview data yielded various topics related to academic integration. The first consideration involves topics under internal factors:

Internal Factors

Internal factors include perceptions, existing beliefs, and general attitudes of the participants. From the data, it can be seen that participants mentioned what international students bring with them to a learning situation. This included attitude, perception, and motivation to study in other countries. For internal factors, there are two themes found in the interview data: the participants' existing beliefs about the university and their attitude towards racism.

Beliefs about Thai Education

The students' belief about the quality of Thai education seemed to be an important issue when they discussed reasons in Thailand. Most of the students perceived that universities in Thailand seemed to have a higher standard than the ones in their home country. This perception contributed greatly to the international students' willingness to come to study in Thailand, as described as follows: "I am saying that Thai universities have higher qualities than universities in Myanmar" (Burmese). "I think that the life in Thailand is very suitable to me and learn especially in the academics and in the background some different in Cambodia, Thai education is better" (Cambodian).

This perception is perhaps formed based on the fact that Thai higher education institutions offered more choices of programs for students. The prevalence of options may be translated to mean being "better." When students perceived that they are in a better situation, they might have been more motivated to do well. We consider this an interesting finding, given that studies have indicated financial factors, and not quality, as significant criteria when enrolling with an international program located in a non-English speaking country (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017).

Apprehension from Racism

Apart from the belief about Thai higher education institutions, all the participants reported the feeling of being inferior when coming to Thailand. The students reported hearing racist encounters from their seniors who studied in Thailand. All of them felt that their nationality gave others a reason to look down on them. As a result of this pre-conceived notion, students are discouraged to make friends with others, especially those outside the university. The following quote is typical of responses received.

First all Pakistani, most of the people don't know about it, and they associate it with terrorism because nowadays we have some issues like the negative relation with US and the Thai people are better responsive with US and European people than for Pakistanis.

This issue was brought up by Rhein (2018). He discussed ethnicized isolation as a situation where a person may be avoided due to their race, while ethnicized attention is a situation where excessive attention is given due to the novelty of a racial encounter. Both types of ethnicization are premised on racial prejudice, though the latter may seemingly appear positive. Similar to the experiences of African Americans studying in Thailand (Rhein, 2018), our participants also affirmed racist encounters, especially outside the university compound. The Burmese student also shared that there was racial tension outside, but all was well within the university. The statement made was "There is no discrimination within the university but outside the university is different."

Within the university and university classrooms, all participants revealed that there was less likelihood of discrimination as compared to outside encounters. They felt that students and lecturers held moderate understandings on cultural differences. This second theme is related to the

prominence of sociocultural factors for academic integration. If students feel unwelcome or unwanted because of their cultural differences, they may have less drive to be engaged or excel in their studies (Dalib et al., 2017). Moreover, this observation may be common in both English and non-English speaking contexts.

External Factors

From the interview data, there are also topics that encompass external factors. These factors included university support, financial support; socio-cultural issues, getting assistance from locals; and, language issues. The external factors are intimately linked with the significance of sociocultural issues for academic integration in higher education.

University Support

Linked with students' belief about Thai education as being "better," university support, especially financial support, was mentioned as a criterion that affected students' academic journey to Thailand. All three students reported that they learned about good financial support from their friends and seniors who had studied at *University X Bangkok*. Two responses were as follows:

This university is popular because a lot of our seniors graduated here at the faculty so they shared the information to the juniors. Also we ask the ambassador of Thailand they announce every year regarding the scholarship. (Cambodian)

So first of all I came to know about Thailand and this university from my senior friends and we have a group in the university where they posted the announcement of scholarships and before coming to Thailand the views of the common people is not so good about Bangkok. (Pakistani)

From these interview excerpts, it can be seen clearly that offering financial support was crucial. When they had positive attitudes about the university, they seemed willing to participate in different kinds of activities that the university organized. One of the participants said that there should be a monthly gathering for international students to mingle with Thais to help with the emotional adjustment and wellbeing of newcomers. This is insightful, as financial support can be positioned as a condition for students to achieve proper academic integration. This may also be a common factor found in both English and non-English speaking countries.

Language Issues

Similar to other studies, which have identified language as a significant criterion for academic integration, the topic of language was also prevalent in the interviews. From the interviews, the three students reported difficulties in socializing with Thai students, believing that the root of was the lack of language proficiency between them. One response received was as follows: "I think the problem they are not sit with you and that the first one is language. Thai students they are scared of people who speak English and another language" (Cambodian).

What is mentioned by the Cambodian student can be seen as a lack of acceptance for an ELT mindset—where communication can still happen when the focus is on meaning and not on form. It also points towards an interesting social phenomenon in Thailand—that is, the maintenance of Thai-ness (Jatuporn, 2017). Not only does a lack of proficiency or confidence in English affect socialization, it may also affect one's academic performance or engagement. Even if students feel that they are proficient enough, because English is not their native language, studying in the English can be daunting, as indicated by a student from Myanmar.

In our country we study using our mother language but in here we have to study using English and ah we are poorer in English because we are Asian students so that's a main problem. Sometimes I am confused with a lot of things. How can I ask Ajarn about this?

Besides academic hurdles, language also posed management hurdles. For instance, many announcements around the campus are in Thai. One response to this practice was as follows:

Some announcement is in Thai language so we can't understand and read. So it's quite difficult if the announcement is for me so I don't know. It's good to announce in both Thai and English to have a friendlier environment for international students. (Burmese)

From these excerpts, it appears that the notion of ELF might be problematic, mainly because there seems to be a lack of initiative from the local students and host institution. The ELF paradigm allows for linguistic affordances to support communication. This means that speakers do not need to possess high-levels of language abilities for communication to happen. However, ELF communication will not happen if one or more of the parties involved in an interaction refuse to engage in a common language.

Help from Thai Friends

While the local students might not be open, in terms of speaking English, students in the interview divulged that the Thai students had been helpful.

They are helpful when I arrive here it is difficult for someone, like especially to order food. My friends in class help to find an apartment to find somewhere and to go somewhere. Even they are busy they help me to go somewhere. They are helpful. Some Thai students I think have difficulty in expressing themselves so they go but most Thai students are familiar talking with international students so they help me a lot. (Burmese)

These incidents from the Burmese participant showed that getting help from Thais seemed to be an important contribution to international student adjustment, despite the limited language ability of parties involved.

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors consist of circumstances that may impede the sociocultural experience for international students. For instance, students may feel forced indirectly to concentrate on studying, instead of making new friends when studying abroad. While not necessarily supportive of sociocultural development, it is purposeful in that international students have a better understanding of the Thai university system and subsequently learn how to cope with rules, regulations and educational policies.

Grade Requirements

Since most of the international students pursuing their degrees are on scholarship, they need to retain good grades. Sometimes, they found that meeting such expectation difficult to achieve as indicated by a Cambodian student.

To me the most pressure I have is the grade requirements I think that the school request of GPA limit is higher than 3.25 and should be below. It is difficult to get an A grade, even B plus, so our scholarship is affected.

The findings in the study highlight three factors affecting the integration of international students in Thailand. It could be seen that sociocultural factors are important for academic integration, but they alone do not determine the extent of students' academic integration. Through the participants' interview, we could see that other factors were linked with academic integration.

Conclusions

The findings from this descriptive study illustrate how academic integration is shaped by students' sociocultural perception and adaptation. The sociocultural factors, however, should not be treated as absolute; instead, they need to be seen as signifiers leading to other factors pertinent to an international study experience. Another observation made from this study was that, while Thailand seeks to be an educational hub for the ASEAN region, perceptions regarding language use need to be adjusted. Specifically, the Thai education community needs to be wary of the impact of their willingness to communicate in English, regardless of whether they have high proficiency. Furthermore, the institution needs to ensure that its intercultural efforts affect the immediate surroundings. Just as

mentioned by the Burmese student, who did not experience any racial prejudice within the university but did feel tension outside of the university, the society at large needs to examine their preconceived notions regarding international students. Only when there is a willingness to accept international visitors can sociocultural exchange and study abroad experiences be facilitated better. To achieve this, stakeholders in the education sectors and the community need to address conflicts that have surfaced due to the globalization of the workforce and westernization of Thai higher education (Lao, 2019; Rhein, 2016; Rhein & Jones, 2020). For our study, conducted in a non-English speaking context, this can constitute a distinct consideration for academic integration, aside from sociocultural factors.

From the findings and discussion, the following could be considered by administrators of Thai higher education institutions:

1. For international students, offer long-term courses on local language and culture, including courses that teach about the day-to-day happenings in the community;
2. For academic and administrative staff, provide professional development workshops grounded in intercultural competencies, especially for those working in international programs;
3. For the institution, gradually adjust the image of an institution through ample use of English, especially if international programs are offered; and
4. For the institution, ensure that intercultural opportunities are pervasive throughout the university (in classes or in extra-curricular activities) and its immediate surroundings.

Aside from being culturally aware to encourage academic integration, academic staff can also take into account the prospect of equitable teaching. This approach strives to minimize discrepancies in teachers' management of student and promotes students to take responsibility for their learning (Saban, 2013). Only by being cognizant of the cultural diversity present in an international classroom can students become aware of the issues involved (Loo et al., 2018). After all, academic integration is a complex construct involving multiple variables; thus, students' ability to settle within a new education domain needs also to be understood in the manner in which classes are organized.

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